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OR,

The Master of the Triangle Ranch.

A Romance of the Wichita Country.

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AUTHOR OF "LONE HAND ON THE RIO GRANDE,"
"THE FRESH OF 'FRISCO," "TALBOT OF
CINNABAR," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE RED WOLVES OF WICHITA.

THE night was dark, the hour of twelve was near at hand, and the rain had been pouring in torrents, accompanied by a violent wind which shrieked and roared across the vast and treeless Texan plains.

It is of the great State of Texas that we write and the scene of our tale is located in Greer county, that debatable land whose exact status is so uncertain—whether it is a part of the State, or a slice of the Indian Territory, which by a surveyor's mistake has been assigned to Texas.

But the adventuring pioneers have flocked into the land, and taken up claims, relying upon the hope that it would be finally decided that the county was a part of the State.

"HARDACRE, HAVE THE KINDNESS TO SNAP THOSE BRACELETS ON THE WRISTS OF FRIEND GALLAGHER," ORDERED THE LONE HAND.

But until the matter was settled the State of Texas could not exert its authority over the tract, and so the settlers were forced to make laws for themselves.

This fact attracted into the territory a host of men who were anxious to settle in some place where the iron hand of the law, which they had outraged, would not be likely to reach them, and in truth it could be said the society of Greer county was decidedly mixed.

Despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, the settlements in the district were growing rapidly, and the homesteaders, with their claims, were encroaching on the domains which had been sacred to the cowboys and their herds.

One of the most flourishing settlements in the county was the one which bore the name of Greerville, situated on the south bank of the Red River a few miles from the junction of the North Fork of the Red with the main stream, and it is of Greerville that we write.

The rain had been falling steadily for a good twelve hours, coming down in that tireless and energetic manner peculiar to the Southwest, where in the wet season it sometimes rains for a week at a time as hard as it can pour, but now as midnight was near at hand the storm abated a little.

As a rule the inhabitants of the town kept late hours; it was the trading point for the ranchers located along the upper Red and on the North Fork; boasted a hotel, a saloon and a gambling-house, three separate concerns as it happened, not all in one, as is usually the case along the frontier, and a good-sized general store, where almost everything could be bought that was likely to be called for in such a community, but on this night of which we write, the storm, having raged all day, had interrupted business to such an extent that ten o'clock found everything closed in the town, and the inhabitants improved the opportunity to go to bed early.

From some of the houses a light gleamed through the window-curtain or shutter-crack, but this was because it was a custom with some to keep a lamp burning through the night.

One of the houses through the chinks of whose shutters a ray of light stole forth was occupied by the Jew, Abraham Goldsburg, who kept the store, reputed to be the largest in Greer county.

Although the rain had died out, the wind was still violent and the night extremely dark.

Through the gloom of the great prairie, which stretched away from the town on the south, rode three horsemen.

They were mounted on the hardy little Texan mustangs, which, like singed cats, are a great deal better than they look, and they wore "slickers," as the oiled, waterproof garments are termed by the cowboys.

Apparently the three were cowboys, for they wore the broad-brimmed felt hat which is so necessary to the men who lead the cow-puncher's life, but their faces were covered with dark masks, and when in the last minutes of the storm the lightning had dispelled the darkness for a moment with its vivid flashes, it revealed the fact that the masks were blood-red in hue.

In truth, an ominous-looking trio.

The three men rode to the small corral in the rear of the Jew's store, which he had provided for the accommodation of the horses of his customers, there dismounted from their steeds, and secured them.

"Put your jimmy together, Bill, and we will try the trick," said the tallest one of the three, a muscular, well-built fellow, who seemed to be the leader of the party, judging from the tone of command in which he spoke.

The man addressed as Bill, a rather short, thick-set fellow, produced from under his shikes coat two pieces of steel which he dextrously put together, and when this was done it seemed like one solid bar.

This tool was the housebreaker's famous weapon, the jimmy, the crowbar-like instrument which inserted in the crack of a door would cause it to fly open unless it was guarded by fastenings of wonderful strength.

"All right, Cap," the thick-set fellow responded, "the tool is ready for the job."

"Now, boys, the programme is for you, Bill, to force open the door, and then, Joe, you and I will go for the Jew with our revolvers, but it is not our game to use them," the leader of the three remarked. "Although everybody seems to be in bed, and in all probability there is hardly a soul awake in the town, yet the sound of firearms would be apt to rouse the settlement, and it is our policy to do the job as quietly as possible."

"Sorrah a doubt of that!" exclaimed the third man of the two, who was a tall, lathy fellow, and spoke with a decided brogue which plainly betrayed he was a son of the Emerald Isle. "We must be atther acting like the feller in the play, talk daggers, but use none."

"Yes, that is the idea," the leader replied. "And now let us get at it."

The three left the corral and proceeded to the house.

The Jew's domicile was arranged after the fashion common to the traders in the Southwest. The store was in the front of the building, which was only a rough, one-storied shanty, run up as

cheaply as possible, for lumber is exceedingly scarce and dear on the almost treeless Texan plains, and in the rear were living rooms.

With the noiseless step of the tiger stealing upon its prey the three approached the house, although there was little need for so much caution for the wind was roaring so violently that it would have drowned the sound of a horse's hoof, beating the earth in a rapid gallop.

The man with a jimmy applied it to the door, first listening for a few moments in order to assure himself that there was no one stirring within.

He used the tool with a skill which showed he was no novice at this kind of work.

The door had a stout lock upon it—a good lock, as locks go in Texas, and was further guarded by a couple of bolts, one near the top of the door and the other at the bottom, but such was the remarkable force exerted by the burglar's tool, when the operator put his strength upon it, that the door flew open with a sharp crack, tearing the catches of the lock and bolts violently from their places.

The moment the door was open, into the apartment rushed the two men, flourishing their revolvers; the fellow who had broken open the door followed quickly, and closed the portal after he entered, placing his back against the door.

The surprise was complete.

The intruders found themselves in a small apartment about twelve feet square, scantily furnished, for there was only a table, a couple of chairs, and a rude sort of lounge covered with a buffalo-skin.

On the west side of the room were two doors, both now open, revealing that there were two rooms on that side of the house.

These were the bed-chambers of the old Jew and his daughter, Rebecca, who assisted him to run the store.

But as it happened neither Goldsburg nor his daughter had gone to bed.

The old man had lain down upon the lounge and gradually fallen asleep.

The girl, having become interested in a most thrilling love story, a novel presented to her by a cowboy admirer, had determined to sit up until she finished it, but slumber had overtaken her, and with her head bowed upon the table she presented an extremely pretty picture, for the Jewish maid was a good-looking girl with her dark eyes, raven black hair and olive-tinged features.

Goldsburg himself was a typical Hebrew with his prominent nose, bushy eyebrows, and billy-goat beard.

The two started up in alarm when the masked men broke into the room.

Quickly and sternly came the command from the lips of the leader of the intruders.

"Be silent if you value your lives! A single cry of alarm and it will cost you dearly!"

And the masked men emphasized the threat by leveling their revolvers at the father and daughter.

Both the old Jew and the Jewess had lived all their lives on the frontier, and they understood the region well enough to comprehend that this was no idle boast.

Outlaws, such as these men evidently were, held human life extremely cheap, and if their victims offered resistance they would be certain to kill without mercy.

"Oh, mine gootness!" exclaimed Goldsburg, who spoke with a slight foreign accent, "don't shoot, mine goot gentlemen, we will be as still as the smallest mouse!"

The girl did not speak but there was a glint of fire in her flashing black eyes, which told that she was made of sterner stuff than her affrighted parent, and that if there had been a chance to offer a successful resistance she most surely would have done so, but under the circumstances it would be utter madness to attempt to fight the intruders.

"I am glad to see that you are inclined to be sensible, Father Abraham," the outlaw chief remarked, calling the Jew by the nickname that the cowboys had bestowed upon him.

"Oh, mine gootness, yesh!" the Jew exclaimed, trembling with terror. "I am as sensible a man as you will find in der whole State of Texas!"

"Glad to hear it!" the outlaw declared. "It is a pleasure to do business with a man of sense. I know that you have the reputation of being that kind of a hairpin, but even sensible men sometimes make fools of themselves when they get into an affair of this kind."

"Oh, mine goot fr'end, I will not make a fool of mineself!" the Jew protested.

"Well, of course I didn't know how you would take it, for this is the first time we have ever had the pleasure of doing any business with you," the outlaw remarked, speaking in hoarse tones, evidently assumed to disguise his natural voice.

"I suppose you know who we are?"

"Mine gootness, no, how should I?"

"Well, I reckoned our red masks and hands would have put you up to the trick."

And then for the first time the old Jew noticed that the three intruders wore blood-red gloves upon their hands.

"Ah, yesh, mine gootness! I t'ink I hafe heard of you," Goldsburg admitted.

The outlaw chief gave utterance to a hoarse laugh, and his companions also chuckled.

"Yes, I reckon you *habe* heard of us; mighty few men are there in this county of Greer, or in a hundred square miles around it, either, for that matter, who have not heard of the Red Wolves of Wichita."

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish true!" the old Jew murmured, his nerves all in a tremble.

"We are called the Wolves because like those beasts we are always in search of game, and we prey without mercy. In the Wichita Mountains we have our home and we wear the red masks and gloves as a sort of sign, a trade-mark, so to speak; so when we come down on a man he will understand that we mean business, and will know enough not to waste time by trying any gum games."

"Yesh, yesh," muttered Goldsburg, perceiving that the outlaw expected him to say something.

"And now that we have introduced ourselves, we will go ahead with our trading."

"Trading?" exclaimed the Jew in wonder.

"Yes, we came to trade, of course, though, maybe you wouldn't think so from the odd way we went at it, but then we are queer ducks, anyhow," and again the outlaw laughed hoarsely, his companions joining in the merriment.

"You know we are a set of tax-collectors," the man continued. "There isn't any regular law officers in this hyer Greer county, no police, and so we have taken upon ourselves to protect the community. We are not going to have any road-agents or horse-thieves preying upon the people at large. It is our business to drive all rascals away, and, of course, you men who are protected must pay for it. We have never called upon you for a contribution, but you must come down now."

"I am a poor man—I hafe so little monish," whined the Jew. "Times ish hard; it is all I can do to make a living."

"Oh, yes, certainly!" exclaimed the outlaw, sarcastically. "That is the cry always with you Jews; you always make a poor mouth; if you were rolling in wealth you would swear that you didn't have a cent in the world. Why can't you ever speak the truth?"

"Oh, it ish the truth, so help me Moses!" Goldsburg protested.

"No, no, the truth is not in you," the outlaw exclaimed. "You ought to take pattern by me. They all call me Gospel Dan, because I am always a man of my word, and what I say can be relied upon; and these pards of mine are good squar' fellows too; this big fellow is Kiowa Bill, the best man on the Kiowa Reservation, and this galoot, Lean Joe, the boss hustler of the Canadian. We are business men, all of us, right up to the handle, and now we want you to toe the mark—come up to the scratch, smiling, you know."

"Mine goot fr'end, I will do the best I can for you!" the Jew protested. "How much do you want?"

"Two thousand dollars!" responded the other, dwelling upon the words.

Goldsburg gave a cry of alarm, and threw his hands up in a despairing sort of way.

"Two thousand dollars! Mine gootness, gentlemen, where do you think a poor man like me could get such a sum as that?"

"Oh, come, don't try any nonsense now," the outlaw chief exclaimed harshly. "You must not think that you can pull the wool over our eyes, for it cannot be done. I reckon that you don't know as much about us Red Wolves as you ought to, for if you did you would understand that we are always mighty well informed, and never make any mistake about these little business matters; we never call on a man for a contribution bigger than he is able to pay."

"Two thousand dollars!" exclaimed the old Jew, beginning to tear his hair. "Mine goot friends, all der stock in der store is not worth as much as dot."

"Oh, we don't want your stock, or your store either," the outlaw replied. "Cash is what we are after, and cash is what we must have. Do you know a man by the name of Alexander Wallace, the proprietor of the Triangle Ranch?"

The old Jew stopped tearing at his hair, and began to wring his hands, evidently in great distress.

"Aha! I see you do know Alex Wallace, and I am glad that you are wise enough not to attempt to deny it!" the outlaw chief remarked.

"You held a mortgage on his ranch for two thousand dollars, and Wallace paid off that mortgage to-day; you have the money in the house, for you have been closely watched ever since you received it, and I know that you have not had a chance to put it away anywhere. Alex is a pretty good fellow, but he would get along better if he did not drink so much whisky, for when he gets a few drinks into him he is apt to tell about all he knows, and in a country like this a man can't be too careful in regard to what he says, particularly in saloons where there are plenty of men around with their ears open to catch pointers wharby money can be made."

The Jew was in a terrible state, as was plainly

to be seen from the convulsive working of his face and the way he trembled.

It was true that he had received the two thousand dollars that day from the rancher, Alex Wallace, the owner of the Triangle Ranch, so called from his brand, which was a triangle inclosing a W. He had the money in the house too, and that was the reason he had not gone to bed; he had been afraid of robbers, and so had resolved to sit up to protect his treasure; on the morrow it was to be sent away, but in spite of his precautions he had been entrapped.

"Oh, mine gootness!" wailed the Jew. "Mine dear friend, can we not make some arrangement?"

"No! the two thousand is what we are going to have!" the chief of the Red Wolves replied, with firm determination.

"Oh, I am ruined!" Goldsburg declared.

"Bosh!" exclaimed the outlaw, in supreme contempt, "two thousand dollars is only a flea-bite to you, although you are making so much row about it! Come! hand the money over! Don't force us to use violence, which we will not hesitate to do if we see that you are inclined to be obstinate. Just you make up your mind that we are going to have that leetle two thousand if we have to cut the throats of both you and the girl, and then tear the shanty to pieces to find out where you have hidden the money!"

And, as he spoke, the ruffian, with his left hand, drew his ten-inch bowie knife from the scabbard and flourished it in the air.

The old Jew fell upon his knees in an agony of terror, and the girl uttered a slight scream of alarm, the sound wrung from her involuntarily.

Quickly the outlaw chief put his knife to the throat of the girl, so near that the keen point almost pierced the skin.

"Another sound like that and it will be your last on earth!" he threatened.

"Oh, Father in Israel! do not kill my child!" the old Jew exclaimed, forgetting his own terror in the contemplation of the danger which menaced Rebecca.

"Give up the ducats, keep your mouths shut, and neither one of you will be in danger," the ruffian replied.

"Yesh, yesh, you shall have the money, but it ish a terrible blow!" exclaimed the old man, with a sigh which seemed to be wrung from his very soul.

"Nothing but a flea-bite!" the outlaw protested. "You know very well that you have more money now than you know what to do with, and you can better afford to give up a dollar than the rest of the men in the settlement could a cent."

"No, no, it ish not so! I have met with great losses, and what little money I have is so locked up that I cannot get at it," the Jew declared. And then, with many sighs, he drew the two thousand dollars from his pocket and yielded it to the robber.

The outlaw examined the package carefully in order to satisfy himself that the sum was all there, and then said:

"All right, we will not trouble you again until you make another big raise. Don't try to kick up too much row about this matter or it will be the worse for you; so long!"

And away the Red Wolves hurried.

CHAPTER II.

A RECOGNITION.

THE Red Wolves took pains to close the door after them; then they went directly to the corral, mounted their horses and rode away.

A few words passed between them as they mounted.

"I reckon we did this job as nicely as any job of the kind was ever done in the West!" the outlaw chief remarked, with a deal of satisfaction.

"Yes, and you need not bar the East out, either!" Kiowa Bill exclaimed.

"Is thar any danger that the old Jew will give an alarm and try to git the town after us?" Lean Joe questioned.

"Not the least mite of danger that Goldsburg will do anything of the kind!" Gospel Dan replied, confidently. "We have scared the old Jew out of a year's growth, and though from the way the black eyes of the girl snapped I have an idea that she would like to make a fight, yet it is as certain as anything can be that the old man will not allow her to kick up a row, and that is where his head is level, too, for it would not do him any good, and we would be sure to get square with him on the first opportunity. We have got the plunder and are safe out of the house; now if an alarm was raised, we would be a mile away before any one would get out into the street."

"That is so," Kiowa Bill assented.

"Oh, yes, if the old cuss only has sense enough to see it in that light," Lean Joe observed.

"Don't worry yourself about Father Abraham! His head is screwed on all right!" Gospel Dan declared.

By this time the party were in the saddle and away they went at a sharp trot, but not taking pains to urge on their steeds, for they had no fear that aught would be done to impede their

departure, or that any pursuit would be set on foot.

Soon the figures of the three disappeared in the gloom and the sound of their horses' hoofbeats ceased, although the wind was abating and no longer roared with sufficient force to drown almost all other sounds.

For fully five minutes after the departure of the outlaws neither father nor daughter moved, but they listened eagerly in order to ascertain what their late unwelcome visitors were about.

No sound came to their ears, though, to denote that a soul was stirring without.

From the corral the outlaws had ridden directly to the prairie without passing the house.

"Oh, father, is not this monstrous?" the girl exclaimed, in an outburst of indignation.

"Be careful, my child, be careful how you speak!" the old man warned. "If those bad men heard what you said, they might be tempted to come back and put both of us to death!"

The old Jew trembled violently as he spoke, and it was plain that he had received a fright from which he would not be apt to recover for many a long day.

"Shall we not rouse the town, father, so that these ruffians can be pursued and the money recovered?" the girl questioned.

Old Goldsburg shook like a man with the ague at the bare idea.

"Oh, my dear Rebecca, you must not talk in dot way!" he cried. "Do you want to have us both killed in cold blood?"

"No, no, father, but if we rouse the citizens will they not fight the robbers?"

"I don't know—I do not feel sure of dot," and the old Jew shook his head in a dismal way.

"In a country like this, it ish each man for himself, and if we should make a row, it maybe dot the citizens would not move a finger to help us, and der first time der Red Wolves got a chance, they would be sure to make it warm for me again."

"But it is dreadful to be robbed in this horrid way!" the girl declared.

"Yesh, dot ish der truth, so help me Moses!" the old man declared, pathetically. "I did not want to take der monish. I told Wallace dot I wished he would wait until to-morrow so I could send it right away without having to keep der monish in der house over night, but he laughed at me, and said I was too chicken-hearted to live in Greer county, and that I had better go to some big city where I could get a force of policemen to protect me, and I, like a foolish mans, as I was, allowed him to persuade me to take der monish, and now it is gone."

"Yes, but can you not get together a force to pursue these robbers?" asked Rebecca, who had the warlike spirit of old Israel strong within her.

"No, no, my dear child, you do not understand der matter at all!" the old man exclaimed, nervously. "You must remember that we are in a country where there is no law—no police. If I was a cowboy rustler now I might be able to do something, but it ish not probable dot I could catch these rascals and get my monish back even then. Up mid der Wichita Mountains is a wild place, and it would take a small army to hunt such men as these out of their holes."

"Oh, no, there is no chance for me; der two thousand dollars are gone."

Just as he ended the sentence there came a knock at the door which startled both of the inmates of the apartment, the old man particularly so.

"Oh, mine gootness, Rebecca, I hope they have not heard what you said about rousing der citizens and come back to kill us both!" the aged Hebrew cried, in a hoarse whisper.

"They would not knock, father; it must be somebody else!" replied the girl, her quick wits arriving at this decision immediately.

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish so. I did not think of dot!" and then the old man hastened to the door.

He opened it and the light fell upon a stranger whom Greenville had never seen before.

The man was a tall, muscular fellow of thirty-five or thereabout, with the high cheek-bones and long oval face peculiar to the men of the Southwest. His dark gray eyes, which seemed to be black a few paces away, flashed with the light of command, and the resolution upon his massive features seemed to say that he was one used to leading men. His long dark hair, clubbed over the ears in the odd fashion once so popular in the South, gave him a peculiar appearance.

He was dressed plainly, wearing a blanket coat of gray, the garment so formed that the black stripes ornamented the skirts, dark pantaloons, high riding-boots, no vest, and a dark blue flannel shirt covered his massive chest.

Around his waist was a stout leather belt, and although no weapons were visible, yet a judge in such matters would quickly have decided that the belt sustained a brace of good revolvers, accompanied in all probability by one of the heavy bowie-knives, so common to the region.

"I beg your pardon," said the stranger with a polite bow, and in a tone peculiarly strong

and sonorous. "I don't want to intrude, but seeing a light gleaming from your house I made bold to knock, particularly as your place seems to be the only one in the village which shows any signs of life. I am a traveler, but my horse had the ill-luck to go lame some three miles away and I was compelled to tether him on the prairie and come along on foot. This is Greenville, I suppose?"

"Yesh, yesh!" responded the old Jew, studying the face of the stranger intently.

"I am not out of my way then, for this is the point I intended to strike. I suppose there is a hotel here where I can get accommodations, although I haven't seen anything that looked like one?"

"Oh, yesh, the Lone Star Hotel, Pop Anderson's place; it ish der fourth house on der right as you go up der street," the old Jew remarked.

"Much obliged! I presume I can rouse somebody there if I make noise enough," and the stranger made a movement as if to depart.

"Hold on, hold on, my dear fr'end!" Father Abraham exclaimed. "You need not bother yourself to go to the hotel; you can come right in here and I will do my best to make you comfortable for the night!"

Rebecca was astonished at this offer, and gazed at her father in wonder. It was the first time that she had ever heard him extend such an invitation to any one.

"Well, if it will not put you out too much," the stranger replied.

"Not at all, my dear fr'end, I will take care of you to-night, and you can go to der hotel in der morning," the old Jew replied.

"All right! I will accept your hospitality in the same frank spirit in which it is offered, and if at any time it lies in my power to return the service, pray command me."

"It is nothing—nothing at all, my dear friend!" Father Abraham protested.

Then the stranger's keen eyes happened to notice the condition of the door—the bolts with the catches attached to them and the broken edge of the wood where the jimmy had been inserted.

"Hello, hello!" he exclaimed, "what does this mean?"

"Come in, come in, my dear fr'end, it ish nothing!" replied the old Jew, peering nervously over the shoulder of the stranger into the darkness as though he expected to see some of the outlaws lurking near.

The stranger complied with the invitation.

Rebecca brought him a chair, while Father Abraham got a hammer and nails and proceeded to repair the door.

He succeeded in putting it in order after a fashion and then turned his attention to the stranger.

"Ah, my dear friend, I have been in some awful trouble to-night!" the old Jew declared with a deep sigh.

"Well, when I saw the condition of the door I fancied that something rather out of the common must have occurred," the other remarked.

"Yesh, yesh, you are right and I will tell you all about it. But you are hungry and thirsty, maybe!" exclaimed Goldsburg as the thought came to him.

"You are right there, for I haven't had anything since noon."

"Rebecca, there is some cold ham; bring it wid der bread and cheese, and some whisky, and some water for der gentlemen."

The girl hastened to produce the articles, full of wonder at the hospitality of her sire.

The stranger made a sandwich out of the bread and ham, mixed himself a glass of whisky and water—grog, in the English fashion—and proceeded to satisfy the wants of the inner man.

"Ah, my dear friend, I have been awful treated," and then Father Abraham related what had occurred.

The stranger listened attentively, and allowed the old man to finish his tale before he spoke, then he said:

"Do you know anything about these Red Wolves?"

"Oh, mine gootness, yesh; everybody in Greer county knows of them! They have their headquarters in der Wichita Mountains, one of der wildest regions dot there ish to be found in der Southwest, and for over a year now they have played der mischief wid many peoples."

"How many are there in the band—does anybody know?"

"I think not; there was three inside here to-night, but how many was on der watch outside, I know not."

"Have you any reason to believe that there were any?"

"Oh, no; all I saw was der three."

"It is a strange affair," the other mused. "Did anybody know that this rancher paid you the money?"

"Not to my knowledge," Father Abraham replied. "You can rest assured I did not say a word about it to a soul. I did not want to take der cash and keep it in der house over night, but Wallace insisted dot I must, and he laughed at me when I told him dot I was afraid."

"What sort of a man is this Wallace?"

"Oh, he ish a nice fellow, but he ish a little fast; he ish too fond of der whisky, and likes to go on a time. Before der settlements began he made big monish mit his cow-punchers, but now der range is growing small and times for the ranchers are not what they used to be."

"Do you think it is likely that he was foolish enough to mention in some saloon that he had paid you this money?"

"Oh, yesh, it is likely; dot ish der kind of man he ish—a mild devil who never thinks twice before he speaks once," Goldsburg declared.

"Where did he get this two thousand dollars that he paid you?"

"He sold a big bunch of cattle. His range is overstocked, and he had to get rid of them, and folks say he lost monish on them."

"I suppose he was anxious to meet your mortgage?"

"Yesh, yesh, dot was it," Goldsburg declared. "It was overdue, and I was beginning to press him for der money."

"Well, as things have turned out, it would have been better for you if you hadn't," the stranger observed, dryly.

"Yesh, yesh, mine gootness, yesh!" the old Jew exclaimed, wringing his hands. "But who could have told dot?"

"Very true! We are not prophets, to see into the future; if we were, we would not be apt to make so many mistakes."

"Oh, there ish no doubt 'bout dot; but I say, mine dear fr'end, will you not help me a little? Will you not try to track out these Red Wolves and recover my two thousand dollars?" asked Father Abraham in an insinuating way.

"What, I?" exclaimed the stranger, in accents of astonishment, while the girl looked at her father in amazement, wondering what had put such an idea into his head.

"Yesh, yesh—you! Ah, my dear fr'end, you can do der trick as easily as turning over your hand, if you will only try!" the old Jew declared.

"You are disposed to be extremely complimentary," the stranger remarked. "But I am at a loss to understand why you should think that I, a stranger in this region, would be able to do anything to bring these outlaws to justice, when the old settlers here are apparently set at defiance by these ruffians."

The old Jew glanced around him cautiously, just as if he was afraid that some listener was lurking near; a cunning look appeared upon his wrinkled face; then he nodded his head in a knowing way and said:

"Dot ish all right, I am up to snuff! Aha! Fodder Abraham, as der cowboys call me, was not born yesterday. You need not be afraid to speak before my child, Rebecca, she is not like other girls. She knows enough to keep her mouth shut all der while; is not dot so, Rebecca?"

"Oh, yes; although people think that a woman cannot keep a secret, yet father trusts me with all his business affairs just the same as if I was not a girl," the Jewish damsel observed.

The stranger took a look at the finely-marked features of the maid, noted the resolute lines around the mouth, the light of determination which shone in the dark eyes, and, being a good judge of character, realized that this girl was one who would be quite free from the usual weaknesses of her sex.

"Your daughter looks like a girl who could be trusted," he remarked.

Rebecca smiled at the compliment, and replied:

"No one ever found me untrustworthy, and yet father has confided a number of important business secrets to my care."

"I can readily believe both assertions," the stranger remarked.

"I spoke about Rebecca, so that you need not be afraid dot your secret would get out," Goldsburg remarked.

"My secret!" exclaimed the stranger in a tone of surprise.

"Yesh, yesh, mine gootness! I am onto you, mine fr'end. I will explain. I was in Little Rock about four years ago on a visit to my brudder, Leopold, who keep der big store on Markham street."

The stranger nodded as much as to intimate that he knew the place.

"And I saw you there then. Mine brudder, Leopold, had troubles mit one of his clerks; he robbed der store, was caught and put in jail, from which he escaped after killing one of the jailers. He went to the Indian Territory; he was a half-breed young man, and had plenty of friends mit der Indians, wild fellows, too, who said der man should never be taken alive, but you went there single-handed, and when you came back, der scamp was mit you, and he is in der jail now for life."

"Your name is Goldsburg, I take it," the stranger remarked.

"Yesh, dot is right, Abraham Goldsburg—Fodder Abraham der cowboys call me in their fun, and your name is Hand—der Lone Hand, because you always grabs your men mitout asking any help from nobody."

"Under the circumstances, then, I don't suppose it will be of any use for me to attempt to

deny my identity," the Lone Hand observed, with a quiet smile.

In truth it was the celebrated man-hunter, who had made so great a name in the Southwest, although he had always done his best to keep in the background; going upon the theory that a great part of his usefulness would be gone if the public at large became familiar with his person, and understood that he was the man who had brought so many desperate criminals to grief.

"Oh, no, mine dear fr'end, I knew you the moment I set eyes upon your face mit der doorway, and I said to mineself, here ish der man who can hunt der Red Wolves out of their holes."

Rebecca now understood why her father had been so lavish in his hospitality, and the Lone Hand, too, came to the conclusion that if the old Jew had not recognized him he would not have been so warmly welcome.

"Well, I will do what I can for you," the man-hunter remarked. "But you must keep secret the fact that you know who I am. No one must suspect that there is any understanding between us. I will leave here in the morning before any one is up and make believe to enter the town as though I had never been in it before."

"Dot ish good!"

"And after I get quarters at the hotel, I will drop in and buy something of you, and in that way make your acquaintance."

"Yesh, dot will do. Everybody comes mit mine store; I keep der post-office."

"Oh, you do? Then you are the very man I want to see. I am in search of a party named Godfrey Lovelance."

The old Jew shook his head.

"Rebecca keeps der post-office," the father remarked. "Mine child, ish dot name familiar to you?"

The girl shook her head.

"No, sir; there is no man by that name that I know of; no letters have ever come for him."

"It is not probable that the party is known by his right name, even in this remote locality. Men who are fugitives from justice usually change their names."

"Yesh—yesh, dot ish so."

"Now I will make a bargain with you; help me to find my man, and I will do what I can to get on the track of these Red Wolves."

"Oh, yesh, we will do it; Rebecca and I will do all we can, and we will work cunningly, too, so that no one will know anything about your little game."

And so the arrangement was made. The Lone Hand spent the night on the lounge and departed at daybreak, succeeding in getting out of the town without being seen.

He returned to where he had tethered his horse on the prairie; found the animal able to go on, though not to bear weight; and so, leading his lame steed, entered Greenville and proceeded to the Lone Star Hotel.

CHAPTER III.

"PULL YOUR FREIGHT!"

FROM Greenville the road to the northwest runs along the bank of the Red River, following the course of that stream. It is the old Texas cattle trail, and the pioneers who have taken up farms in the neighborhood, settled as closely to the trail as they could get, so there was a string of "dug-outs" and "sod houses"—which was the best these hardy rustlers could do in the way of habitations, owing to the absence of timber—for a good three miles from the town.

On the morning that witnessed the appearance of the Lone Hand in Greenville, a big, burly fellow, with a bluff, good-natured face, was riding along the up-river trail.

He was dressed in the usual rough garments common to the frontier, and was heavily armed, according to the general custom.

This was a well-known man all through upper Texas and the Indian Territory. He was called David Smith—commonly called Big Dave Smith, the stockman, and was one of the most prominent speculators and dealers in live stock along the border.

Smith had got out of the farm regions, a mile or so from the last settler's abode, when he encountered two cowboys riding toward Greenville.

When they came up to the stockman they halted and exchanged salutations.

These men were good representatives of the class to which they belonged. One was a tall, dark-faced fellow, with features as rough as though carved out of a pine knot; the other, thin-visaged and rather undersized, had a face that plainly betrayed he was of Irish extraction.

They wore the leather pantaloons, laced up the side, which the English-speaking cowboys had borrowed from their Mexican brothers, also the short jacket and the stiff, broad-brimmed hat which they derived from the same source. Their long-legged riding-boots possessed the high French heels considered so indispensable by your true cowboy, who desires to be in good "form," and the massive spurs which ornamented their heels had the clickers attached

which made bell-like music at the slightest motion.

They were well-armed, of course. No man in all the wild West land needs good weapons more than the cowboys when in discharge of their duties. Oftentimes the herd of which they are in charge will be stampeded in the night. The cattle will rush madly away, rendered almost crazy by some hidden, nameless terror, just as humans sometimes lose their wits without reason. It is then the cowboys' task to turn the herd in their wild rush over the prairie, by riding around them in a wide circle, shouting the cowboys' song at the top of their voices, a process of great danger, for if a man's horse should happen to stumble, and the rider go down, he would speedily have the life trodden out of him by the infuriated animals.

Around the herd circle the wild riders; without ceasing comes the chant from their lips:

"Hay a-a-a—yo-o-o-o, hay-a-a-a—yo-o-o-o!"

Oftentimes a steer here and there, rendered perfectly crazy by fear, will break away from the herd and go off at a tangent; such beasts must be immediately shot down, and here is where the heavy revolvers of the cowboys come in play, for if the example of the mad steer is followed by the rest it would result in the dispersion of the herd, and the chance would be great that the cattle could not be got together again for a week or two, and a large number would certainly be lost.

The cowboys had halted upon meeting Smith and he had done the same.

"How are ye?" said the tall, hard-faced cowboy. "I reckon I have seen you before, somewhere?"

"I reckon you have, for I ain't no stranger in these parts. My name is Smith—Big Dave Smith, the stockman, I am generally called."

"That is jest what I told my pard hyer as we rode up!" the cowboy declared. "I sed to him, Reddy, if that ain't Big Dave Smith, the stockman, I wish I may die, but for the life of me I can't remember whar I met you."

"Wal, I reckon I am in about the same fix," the stockman declared, fixing his keen gray eyes, searchingly, upon the face of the other.

"It don't matter a cuss, anyway!" the cowboy declared. "Wot's the news?"

"Thar ain't much of anything—cattle a leetle higher, and from the way things look I should not be surprised to see them go a leetle higher yet."

"It is along of those durned settlers coming in and spoiling the ranges!" the cowboy declared. "That is so, ain't it, Reddy?"

"Not the taste of a doubt about that!" the second cowboy declared with decided emphasis.

"Hello! thar's another one of the durned cusses got his burrow up, like a blamed rat!" cried the tall cowboy, having apparently just got his eyes on the dug-out of the nearest settler, and he shook his fist, threateningly, at the unpretending habitation of the settler.

"Oh, that house has been there for some time—a month at least," the stockman declared.

"Is that so? Wa-al, come to think of it, I reckon it is three or four months since I have been along this way, hey Reddy?"

The other "reckoned" that it was about that long.

"We're on our way to Greenville to have a leetle blow-out, and I reckon we will stop and sass this blamed settler for a spell."

"Who are you working for now?" the stockman asked.

"Lige Maxwell, up on the North Fork of the Red. Don't you see the double-cross brand?"

The cowboy referred to the mark on the horses.

"Oh, yes, I see."

"What sort of a rooster is this settler anyhow?" the cowboy asked.

"Wal, I can't say that I know much about the party," Smith replied. "He's a young fellow, I believe; it 'pears to me that thar are two of 'em, but I ain't sure, for I only know one. His name is John MacAlpine, but the boys in the town, on account of his bright hair and beard generally call him Sandy MacAlpine."

"We'll sand him and warn him too, if we git half a chance!" the cowboy declared, threateningly. "Wa-al, so-long! I s'pose we'll see you up our way pretty soon?"

"No, not this trip; maybe next I will go up on the North Fork."

Then they all nodded; the cowboys went on down the trail, while the stockman kept on up the river.

After going on for a hundred yards or so, Big Smith took a look over his shoulder at the cowboy, and it was evident from the expression upon his face that he was puzzled.

"Now, what in thunder is the meaning of this hyer riddle?" he exclaimed. "What did those galoots mean by trying to fool me in this dog-goned style? But they didn't work the trick, although I must allow that they put up the game in first-class style."

"They are riding Lige Maxwell's hosses, but they ain't from his ranch, unless they have made a change during the last three months, and that ain't likely, for Lige is going out of the

business, and commenced to get rid of his cattle the last time I was along. Those fellows are both Triangle men from Alex Wallace's ranch. I saw the pair the last time I was thar, and I heered their names, too, and when I once git a face and name into my noddle, I never forgit 'em. The tall feller is George Hardacre, and he is hard by nature as well as name, and the other cuss is Reddy Gallagher, two as bad eggs as kin be scared up in all Greer county, I reckon, and it is a mystery to me how Wallace manages to git along with them, for I s'pose I have heered of their gitting kicked out of a dozen good jobs on account of cutting up some deviltry.

"Now, what is their game? Are they going for this Sandy MacAlpine, and was their lies to me for the purpose of throwing Sandy's friends off the track if they went in for to trail 'em arter the trouble?"

"I reckon I have got the hang of the thing, but the game will not work for a cent, for if thar is trouble I kin put anybody on the right scent."

The stockman rode along at a walk, ever and anon glancing over his shoulder, so as to see what the cowboys were about.

We will follow the pair.

"I reckon we did that up brown!" the tall fellow observed with a chuckle.

"You think he was after takin' it in all right?" the other inquired.

"Oh, yes; ain't we riding hosses with the double-cross brand on 'em, and don't that show we are Lige Maxwell's men?"

"That's so, bedad!"

"We have got it fixed all right, and we will talk to this Sandy MacAlpine like a Dutch uncle!"

The house of the settler was constructed in the most primitive way.

A cellar was dug, then a sloping roof of tree-limbs was placed over it, covered with a few inch-planks, over this was piled brush, and on top of all was the dirt which had been taken out of the cellar.

As the cowboys rode up, a young man made his appearance from the house.

He was a good-looking young fellow of five-and-twenty, with a frank, open face, regular features, lit up by honest gray eyes; his hair was flaxen, worn rather long and pushed back of the ears, and a full, short beard of the same hue covered his chin.

He was dressed after the usual fashion in woolen garments, and a broad-brimmed hat, wearing no coat; to his side was belted the customary six-shooter.

"Hello! how are ye—jest come out of yer durned rat-hole, hey?" exclaimed the tall cowboy who answered to the name of George Hardacre, as Big Smith suspected.

The speech was delivered in such a way that it was plainly apparent that it was intended to give offense.

The settler saw at a glance that the riders were a couple of cowboys, and he knew full well that these rough riders had no love for men like himself, engaged in peacefully tilling the soil.

Between the farmers and the cattlemen there is always bad blood. The ranchers regard the settlers as intruders, the farms interfere with the free range of the beeves, and so the cattlemen make war, more or less openly, upon the pioneers who take up claims in the neighborhood of their ranches.

But Sandy MacAlpine was a lad of metal, and although he had never been engaged in any trouble since coming to Greer county, being a man who attended strictly to his own business, yet he was fully able to hold his own in a personal difficulty.

He had been warned when he took up this outlying claim, a good mile from the nearest neighbor, that he might have trouble with the cowboys, for being away from the rest of the settlers some of the ranchers might take it into their heads to force a quarrel upon him, but, confident in his own ability, he had built his dug-out and begun to make a home for himself, and he was not the man to allow himself to be bulldozed by a couple of ruffianly cowboys; still, acting on the injunction that, "a soft answer turneth away wrath," he replied:

"My rat-hole, as you call it, is a mighty comfortable house, and answers for shelter as well as though it was twice as big and twice as expensive."

"Wa-al, if I was a man, I would be a man, I would, and live like one in a decent house and not burrow in the ground like a durned pole-cat!" the cowboy exclaimed in supreme contempt.

"A man must creep before he can walk, you know," the settler answered, good-naturedly, still keeping his temper. "I cannot afford anything better at present, but one of these days, when I get my farm up, then you will see another kind of a house here."

"Dog-gone yer durned old farm!" cried the cowboy, wrathfully. "You and yer farm ought to be put in a bag together and pitched into the Red!"

"Oh, come now, that is no way to talk!" Sandy MacAlpine exclaimed, his brows contracting, for the idea had come to him that his visitor was resolved to make trouble, although

he hoped that it might be merely talk, for he wanted to avoid having any quarrel if it was possible.

"Ain't it?" the cowboy demanded. "Wa-al, that is the way I talk, and don't you forget it! I am a bad egg, I am, when I git started. I am the roughest, toughest old pill of a rustler that you ever struck in all your born days, and my name is Mud!"

"Yis, and me name is Dinnis!" the other cowboy added. "An' we are a pair that's hard to b'ate, do ye mind?"

"Your names are certainly singular enough," the settler remarked, dryly.

He was still in hopes to avoid a difficulty, for he fancied from the bearing of the two that they had both been drinking, and men sometimes, when they get a little too much liquor into them, are inclined to do a deal of talking without having any idea of taking action.

"Oh, we are rustlers, we are!" the tall cowboy declared. "And we are the kind who make it hot for galoots like you, that come squatting down on the peraree, sp'ling it for better men! You durned jack-rabbit, pole-cat-digging farmers are raising merry blazes with the cattle business; yer fences sp'ile the range, and they ought to be cut and yer houses jest rooted out."

"Well, now, stranger, you might just as well try to keep back the waves of the ocean with a broom as to keep the settlers out of this country," Sandy MacAlpine replied, beginning to manifest a trace of temper, for he did not relish being talked to in this offensive style. "You ranchers ought to make up your minds that you have had a good fair innings, and be willing to give way to the new condition of affairs. One thing is certain: you have got to give way whether you like it or not, willing or unwilling! We settlers have come to stay, and if I am a little in the advance there are plenty more at my back."

"Say! you had better not be so durned independent or else you will git into trouble!" the tall cowboy threatened.

"True fer yees!" the other added, with an ominous shake of the head.

"Why, if I was the boss I would jest come to you and say, 'Pull yer freight out of hyer as quick as the Lord will let yer!'" the tall cowboy declared.

"And suppose I refused to comply with the command?" Sandy MacAlpine asked, the color beginning to rise in his face, and a dangerous glitter appearing in his eyes.

"Why then I would make it warm for you if you refused to git!" the other replied. "I would shoot yer little bunch of cattle—I'd cut yer fences, ride through yer crops, pull down yer durned old house and drive yer right off the land!"

"And what the deuce do you suppose I would be doing all this time?" MacAlpine asked, sharply. "Haven't you ranchers got any cattle—couldn't I kill a dozen of your beeves for every one of mine that was sacrificed? Do you suppose we settlers are a lot of slaves to tamely submit to be ridden over by you cowboys?"

"Don't you give me any back-talk!" cried the tall cowboy, angrily. "I have only got a few words to say to you, and I mean to say 'em quick too! Are you going to pull yer freight out of this?"

"Nary pull!" replied the settler with firm determination.

"If you git hurt in this affair you won't have anybody to blame but yourself!" the tall cowboy warned.

"Oh, don't worry yourself. I reckon there isn't any danger of my getting hurt!" MacAlpine retorted.

"Mebbe you think you are a match for both of us!" the other cried, his face dark with rage. "Why, you durned burrowing pole-cat galoot I kin chaw up a dozen cusses like you and not half try!"

"Oh, ride on and attend to your own business!" the settler exclaimed. "You need not think to scare me either with your loud words nor your black looks. I have seen blowhards before and I am not the man to take water because a couple of cowboys choose to get up on their ear!"

"Do you want a fight?" the tall cowboy exclaimed.

"Well, I am not going round with a chip on my shoulder asking people to knock it off, but, if I am assailed, I reckon I will be able to hold my own!" MacAlpine replied.

All the party had been keeping a wary eye upon each other, each man ready for an opportunity to "pull his gun" before the other fellow could get his out; the cowboys were anxious to get the drop on the settler, and MacAlpine, guessing their game, was just as determined that they should not.

"Durn yer eyes!" growled Hardacre, "I've a good mind to draw on ye!"

"You are a couple of cowards, else two of you would not pitch on one man!" MacAlpine declared. "But I reckon I am able for you for all that!"

"What's that?" cried Hardacre, and with the word both he and Gallagher drew their revolvers.

Sandy MacAlpine was equally quick, and now

the three confronted each other, pistol in hand, but none of them attempted to raise the hammers.

Honors were easy so far; no one had secured an advantage.

And at this point, as the settler and the cowboys glared at each other, all ready for battle, yet not knowing exactly how to begin, there came an interruption which put a decidedly different face on the state of affairs.

The door to the dug-out was at the side of the structure, and admittance was had to the house by descending a flight of steps.

This door suddenly flew open, and in the entrance appeared Sandy MacAlpine's partner, Eddie Livingstone, a double-barrel shot-gun at his shoulder, both the hammers raised and the muzzle leveled directly at the two cowboys.

The pair were in such a position that they were completely covered by the gun, and yet there was no danger of MacAlpine being hit by the shots.

Livingstone was a young man of about the same age as his partner, MacAlpine; a good-looking fellow with regular features, yet strongly marked, the firm, square chin in particular indicating an unusual amount of resolution; he was dark-haired, and a mustache and little pointed chin beard of the same dark brown hue ornamented his upper lip and chin.

"Go slow, now, you durned low-lived, no account sons-of-guns!" Eddie Livingstone cried. "I have got the drop on you, and if either one of you attempts to raise a hammer I will fill you so full of holes, that all you will need is a handle to pass for a first-class pepper-box!"

This was a surprise indeed, and the ruffians glared in wonder.

CHAPTER IV.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

THIS totally unexpected appearance put an immediate end to the quarrel.

Under the circumstances it would have been madness for the cowboys to attempt to attack the settler, for there was no doubt that the fowling-piece was loaded with buckshot, and as they were not twenty feet away from the house the discharge of the weapon meant certain death to both of them.

If Livingstone had had a revolver there might be a chance of his missing his aim, even if a good shot, and then he could hardly hope to hit more than one before the other could return the fire, but with a shot-gun, always the South-western desperado's favorite weapon on account of its deadly character, the chances were a thousand to one that the first discharge would give both the cowboys their tickets to the other world.

"Say, I reckon you had better pull your freight out of here!" Livingstone added, sarcastically, enjoying the utter confusion of the pair. "And the quicker you set about it the better, for in my opinion your room is a durned sight better than your company!"

Slowly the horsemen returned their revolvers to their holsters; they were no fools to rush to certain death. The settler had secured an advantage which they could not hope to overcome, and they were perfectly well aware of the fact.

"You don't dar' to give us a fair show!" the tall cowboy cried in sullen rage.

"Ain't I giving you the best show in the world?" Livingstone retorted.

"W'ot kind of a show are you giving us?" the cowboy asked in wonder.

"A show to be struck by lightning unless you clear out of this in double-quick time," the settler replied with a grin. "Come now, vamose! git up and git, and be durned lively about it, too, for I am an awful quick-tempered cuss when I git a-going, and it is really a shame to miss this red-hot chance to fill you two galoots with lead—to shoot you full of holes as a sort of warning to all your cowboy gang that their day has gone, and that they cannot lord it any more over this country."

"You jest put away that gun, take yer pistol and come out on the peraree with yer pard and then we'll see who will git full of holes!" Hardacre exclaimed, fairly boiling over with anger at being thus defied.

"Nary time," replied Livingstone, decidedly. "We haven't lost any cowboys, and are not looking to find any. You just clear out, and in the future keep away from us, for I give you fair warning that if I ever get the drop on you again, I will not stop to say anything about it, but shall pump the lead into you in a way that will be apt to astonish your weak nerves."

"It is your turn now, but I reckon ours will come some time, and when it does, jest you look out, that's all!" the tall cowboy cried, and with this threat they took themselves off.

They did not keep on down the trail to the town, as they had been heading, but went up the road again in the same direction that they had come.

Livingstone came from the dug-out, joined his partner, and together the pair watched the cowboys retreat until they disappeared in the distance.

"Say, old fellow, I think you made a mistake in this matter," Sandy MacAlpine exclaimed.

"How so?"

"Why, when these men challenged us to a fight we ought to have gone out and met them."

"Oh, no; what is the use of getting into a fight with a couple of scoundrels like those two, if it could possibly be avoided?"

"Yes, but we shall probably have to fight them some time," MacAlpine urged.

"Oh, no, that doesn't follow."

"You heard their threats?"

"Yes, but a good deal of that is wind; fellows like those two always do a lot of talking about what they are going to do, but they do not always do it."

"It may be so; still, I think this pair will try for a fight on the first favorable opportunity."

"Possibly; and we must be on the watch that that they do not take us at a disadvantage. But, I say, what do you suppose started these rascals on this tack?"

"I haven't an idea."

"Do you know either of them?"

"No, as far as I know this is the first time I have ever seen them."

"Did you notice the brand on their horses?" Livingstone asked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, a double cross."

"That is Lige Maxwell's brand, I think."

"It is."

"They are his cowboys then."

"I suppose so."

"This is a big mystery!" Livingstone exclaimed. "Maxwell is a good fellow. I was talking with him in Greenville last week, and we happened to speak about the feeling of enmity which exists between the ranchers and the settlers, and he said right out that the ranchers were making fools of themselves; the settlers were here, they had come to stay, and any attempt to drive them back by force would only result disastrously to the men who tried it on."

"Well, that is the opinion of the majority of the ranchmen, I reckon; I know it is as far as I have seen; there may be a few hot-headed fools who think they can keep the tide of emigration back by force, but I fancy they are few and far between."

"Maxwell would never have set these men on to attack you," Livingstone observed, slowly.

"Do you think that some one set them on?" MacAlpine asked in astonishment.

"I do indeed!"

"Why so?"

"Because they rode up primed for a quarrel and proceeded to pick one immediately; I overheard all that was said from the beginning, and the moment the fellow spoke I was satisfied he was looking for a fight, and that is how I happened to be all ready to take a hand in the skirmish."

"Well, it may be possible that they did come for that purpose," MacAlpine remarked, slowly, his mind busy in reflections in regard to the matter. "Now that I come to think it over, it certainly seems like it; still some of these cowboys are extremely quarrelsome, particularly when they have been drinking, and it was my idea that both these fellows were pretty full."

"I don't think so!" Livingstone exclaimed, decidedly. "To my notion they were as sober as either you or I are at this moment. That appearance of being a little in liquor was assumed; they came on purpose for a fight. Didn't you notice that they did not go to the town but returned from whence they came, and they did not go in the direction of Maxwell's ranch either. His place is on the North Fork of the Red."

"I know it; but, I say, if the fellows were set on to attack me who put them up to do it?"

"Ah, now you are asking more than I can tell, but I reckon I can get at the reason though."

"What is it?"

"You have been doing considerable chinning lately with Maggie Anderson, the belle of Greenville, as they call her."

MacAlpine laughed and his face flushed a little.

"Well, what if I have?"

"Some of these cowboys are dead gone on her; their masters too as well, and I reckon some jealous rival put these two scoundrels on you."

"Maybe so," the other observed, thoughtfully. "That is probable, and I must keep my eyes open."

"Deed you must or you will be a gone coon."

"I will be on my guard from this day forth; and you can rest assured I will not be taken un-awares!"

And this declaration ended the conversation.

CHAPTER V.

A SAGACIOUS LOVER.

THE hotel at Greenville, which on a rudely-painted sign bore the picture of a single star and the announcement, "Lone Star Hotel, by James Anderson," was, probably, as peculiar an establishment for the entertainment of man and beast as could be found anywhere along the whole line of the frontier, which is saying a

great deal, for the little towns which have sprung up on the skirmish line of civilization, can show some extremely queer taverns.

It was a one-story shanty, run up in the cheapest and flimsiest manner, and about all the interior partitions were composed of common unbleached cloth; this was owing to the scarcity and dearth of wood.

Upon entering, the guest found himself in the bar-room or "saloon," as it is usually termed. Here on the frontier, as in more civilized communities, the principal profits of the hotel were derived from the sale of liquor. Back of the saloon was the restaurant, or dining-room, from this apartment a narrow passage led to the rear. Upon the sides of this passage were a couple of rooms where guests found sleeping accommodations. There were no beds; each man was supposed to roll himself in his blanket and bunk down upon the soft side of a plank, and the fattest man had the softest bed.

At the end of the entry, at the extreme rear of the building, were the kitchen and sleeping-apartments of the landlord and his family.

The host was a decided character; he was a big, ponderous, middle-aged man, with a very red face, and extremely little hair, answering to the name of James Anderson, but the boys usually called him Jimmy, and the cowboys, as a rule, never called him anything but Pop Anderson.

It was suspected that Pop was a Yank—that is, from the North; all men from the North are Yanks to the average Texan, but the hotel-keeper strenuously denied this, claiming to be from South Carolina.

But the main reason why Anderson was supposed to be a Yank was because he was such a close-fisted fellow; a man more eager for money, and more reluctant to part with it, the State of Texas had never seen.

It is the common belief in the South, that all Southerners are generous, and all Yanks are mean, so, after Anderson set up his hotel in Greenville, and the inhabitants made the discovery that he was one of the kind who clutched a coin so tightly that the grip made the eagle on it squeal, they were sure he was a Yank from the North.

Anderson was not a popular man, although all admitted that he ran a pretty good hotel, but this was due more to Mrs. Anderson, and the daughter, Maggie, than to the old man.

Mrs. Anderson was a big, buxom woman, with a hard face, and reputed to be equally as fond of money as her husband.

Maggie, the daughter, did not take after either parent in looks, although she was a good-sized, well-developed girl, for she was a beauty, not coarse, like her father and mother, but with regular, fine-cut features, lustrous dark-blue eyes, exquisite lips, with little pearl-like teeth, heavy masses of red-gold hair, and a nose slightly inclined to turn up, the only serious blemish on the otherwise almost perfect face.

But this "tip-tilted" nose, served to give her a coquettish air, which was particularly attractive to her admirers.

The girl was full of life and animal spirits; really rejoiced in the fact that she was the belle of the settlement, and was decidedly inclined to flirt with all the good-looking fellows who patronized her father's hotel; but she had never manifested any particular preference for any one man until Sandy MacAlpine came to the town.

Sandy was rather a slow-going, serious fellow, and as he did not immediately fall prostrate at her shrine, and do homage like the rest of the young men, the girl's vanity was piqued, and so she set her cap to catch him.

After awhile she succeeded; MacAlpine became as attentive as any of the rest, and it was soon believed that the girl favored him more than any of the others.

As Maggie waited upon the table in the restaurant, all that her admirers had to do was to order something to eat, and they would be afforded a chance to talk with the girl. It was believed that this fact brought many a coin to the pocket of old Pop Anderson.

The Lone Hand had secured quarters at the hotel, frankly explaining that he was a speculator in search of a good place to locate. He said he had been a rancher, but as the cattle business had seen its best days, in his opinion, he had sold out and was waiting for something else to turn up.

When he went in for his breakfast he encountered the girl, and Maggie, a natural-born flirt, did her best to be agreeable to the handsome stranger, and he fell into conversation with her as naturally as if he had known her all his life. The girl, who was naturally shrewd and quick-witted, despite her frivolous ways, soon comprehended that this stranger was a far superior man to any that had ever come to Greenville since she had dwelt there, and the longer she talked to him the stronger grew her conviction that though he laughed and joked with her, like the rest of the men, and seemed to be as fully impressed with her charms as any of the fellows, yet he was one whom she could never hope to bring in submission to her feet.

And as soon as the coquettish Maggie came to this conclusion, her self-love was wounded.

Mrs. Anderson was much impressed by the looks of the stranger and remarked:

"Maggie, that man looks as if he amounted to something. I should not be surprised if he had a good deal of money."

"Do you think so, mother?" the girl exclaimed, elevating her nose in a disdainful manner.

"Yes, don't you?"

"Indeed I do not; there is something odd and peculiar about him, and it is my opinion that he is no good!"

Maggie was a true frontier girl, and never hesitated to use the current slang of the day when it expressed her meaning, although she had received a good education and knew better.

"You seemed to be having a good time with him, all the same!" the old woman declared.

"I was just trying to find out what kind of a fellow he is."

"Did you succeed?"

"I should smile!" Maggie exclaimed, emphatically.

"He is one of the kind of men who can talk a great deal without saying much of anything, and at the same time he is trying to get out of you all you know."

"Oh, indeed!"

"Yes, that is the kind of man he is. And didn't you notice too that he has a queer way of looking around him, just as if he was on the watch?"

From this remark it will be seen that the girl was a keen observer.

"Well, no, I don't know as I noticed that."

"It is so, and, mother, I have got an idea that this man has cut and run from some place, and he is afraid he will meet somebody who knows him."

"That is very likely," the old woman remarked. "But half the men here have run away from somewhere because they got into trouble."

"I feel sure about him, he's got a wicked eye, mother, an eye that looks right through you!" the girl declared. "I shouldn't be surprised if he has committed murder, or some such crime as that—something big I will bet, for he isn't any common rascal!"

From this conversation it will be seen that the opinion the dashing Maggie had got of the man-hunter was unfavorable in the extreme.

While this conversation was going on in the kitchen, the landlord was having a talk in the saloon with a gentleman whose name has been mentioned, but whom we have not introduced to the reader.

This was Alexander Wallace, the boss of the Triangle Ranch, as he was usually termed.

The rancher was a man of thirty-five, or thereabouts; a well-built, powerful fellow, rather good-looking, although there were hard dark lines on his face which told that his lot had been cast amid toil and strife.

He had dark eyes and hair, a swarthy face, and the heavy mustache which shaded his upper lip was so suspiciously black as to immediately suggest that hair-dye had something to do with its color.

Wallace had come in, taken a drink with Pop Anderson, and, leaning on the bar, engaged in conversation with him.

"It seems to me that this town is growing about as fast as any town I ever struck," the rancher observed.

"Oh, yes, it is; there is no doubt about that. Greenville is just b'iling!" the landlord assented. "It has got on the biggest kind of a boom."

"Do you know, I reckon it would not be a bad speculation for a man to start another store here," Wallace remarked, reflectively. "Old Father Goldsburg isn't as popular as he might be. The boys have an idea that he kinder plays it low down on them once in a while—in fact, whenever he gets a good chance, and I think another store would get a heap of trade."

"Yes, I reckon you are right; the old Jew is pretty steep in his prices."

"I have a blamed good mind to go into the thing!" the rancher exclaimed.

"What, you?"

"Yes, I have done some clerking in my time—a long while ago—but I would soon get the hang of the business again."

"Oh, yes."

"To my thinking there is a big opening here, and if I do not take advantage of it somebody else will."

"That is so, sure as shooting! But what is going to become of your ranch?"

"Oh, I will sell that; there isn't any money in the cattle business now in this region since the settlers have begun to come in so thickly."

"That's true! I reckon the cattlemen will have to git."

"Yes, there's no use to kick against it. What can't be cured must be endured," the rancher remarked with the air of a philosopher.

"But I say, Alex—you will excuse the remark, but as an old friend, I take a liberty, you know," the landlord said in an insinuating way. "Are you well-heeled enough to go into this game—well heeled, financially speaking, you know?"

"Yes, I understand, and you can bet your bottom dollar that I am that!"

"But I reckoned that after you cleared off this mortgage that the Jew held on your place, you wouldn't have much cash left," the landlord observed.

"You are wrong there. I made a big deal in cattle, and cleaned up a lot of money; then I have the ranch and the rest of the stock left. I paid the Jew two thousand yesterday, and I have got as much more left; much good, by the way, that payment did him: you heard about his being cleaned out by the Red Wolves?"

"Oh, yes," the landlord replied, "and I reckon that was one of the boldest things that was ever done in Texas."

"The old Jew has made a fearful howl about it, and, I understand, says he is willing to pay a good big reward for the recovery of the money."

"That is so; he was in here this morning, telling me about it, and he took on in an awful way, too. Why, Wallace, if the money had been all he had in the world, he could not have kicked up a greater row about it."

"Oh, I tell you it makes these Jews squeal when their pocket is touched," the rancher asserted.

"He was asking me if I didn't think some of the boys would make a try to track the robber if he offered a big reward, and I told him I reckoned they would, but when I came to speak to some of them about it, and they went to prospecting a little; they found there wasn't no chance of getting on the track of the men that did the job."

"So they concluded that there wasn't any use in trying, eh?"

"Yes, and I reckoned the boys were about right, too. If the fellows who did the trick were the Red Wolves, as the Jew declares, they are away up in the Wichita Mountain region long before this, and the outfit that attempts to follow them up there will be apt to have a hot time of it."

"Yes, yes, no doubt about that," Wallace declared. "But, I say, Pop, do you know what some of the boys are saying about the thing?"

"No, I haven't heard anything in particular."

"Well, some of them will not have it at all; they do not take any stock in the old Jew's story."

"Sho! you don't say so? They don't believe that he was robbed, eh?"

"No, they think that it is all a game on his part. He is afraid that people will think he is making too much money, so he got up this story to make them believe he is in bad luck."

The landlord reflected over the idea for a few moments.

"Well, I don't know but what there may be something in that," he said at last. "These Jews are awful cunning, and they are always up to all sorts of tricks."

"Yes, and this old galoot is one of the worst in the deck!" the rancher declared. "He had it in for me, too, I am satisfied. He thought I was hard pushed, and I think he calculated upon picking me pretty clean. There were rumors round that I was going to the wall, and I think this old skinflint of a Jew started them so as to hurt my credit and prevent me from raising any money."

"Well, yes, I heard considerable talk 'bout you, too," the landlord admitted. "It was at the time when you were making it lively for the boys, and it was said that you were spending so much money for whisky, and losing so heavily at poker that it was only a question of time—you were sure to bust in the end."

"Ah, bosh!" exclaimed Wallace in contempt, "that is all nonsense! I do like to go out with the gang once in a while, and I put up my money like a gentleman, too, but as to spending more money than I can well afford it is not so, and when I play poker I usually manage to keep my end up, too. Still, I have turned over a new leaf lately, and I don't calculate to put in much more time in that way. I am going to quit ranching, open a store here in Greenville, settle down and get married, that is, if I can induce your daughter, Maggie, to have me."

"Oh, well, I reckon you stand as good a chance as anybody," the father replied, in rather an evasive way.

"I want to secure your influence," the rancher remarked.

"Oh, I will do what I can for you, but Maggie has a mind of her own, and I don't know whether I could be of much help to you or not."

"To my thinking, the man who secures a good word from you, and Mrs. Anderson, will have a deal of help, and I will tell you what I will do. I will put the thing right down on a business basis, you know. Maggie is a great help to you, and it is no more than right that the man who takes her away from you should pay you something."

The face of the old man brightened. To appeal to his avarice was the surest way to secure his attention.

"Yes, that wouldn't be anything but right!" he declared. "But then you know how young folks are nowadays; when they get ready to get hitched they scoot off without paying any attention to the old folks."

"Yes, that is true, but I don't think that it is square, particularly when a girl is such a help

to her folks as Maggie is to you!" Wallace declared.

"Now I am willing to make a fair arrangement with you," he continued. "I don't want you to think that I am trying to rob you of the girl; I am willing to put up my money for her, like a gentleman! She is worth a good thousand dollars to you, and that is what any man ought to pay who gets her!"

This declaration made the old man's eyes sparkle.

"Well, well, that is a good bit of money!" he declared, striving to conceal the interest he felt in the matter.

"Not a cent more than you ought to get for the loss of the girl, and the man who takes her away from you ought to put up the ducats, too!" Wallace exclaimed, emphatically. "I can tell you, pop, I am willing to do it. The day I marry Maggie, before the ceremony takes place, I will put a thousand good dollars into your hand, and I want you to understand that this isn't any idle talk, Pop, I have got the money, and plenty more on top of it, too, and I am willing to give the price. Just see here!" And then the rancher drew from an inner breast-pocket a large roll of bills and counted out fifteen hundred dollars upon the bar before the astonished eyes of the old man.

"Money talks, you know, Pop, and this backs up what I say!" the rancher declared. Then he separated a hundred dollars from the rest and shoved them across the bar to the landlord.

"There! Just you take that as an earnest that I mean business, and no mistake. I will put that up as a forfeit!"

The old man took the money eagerly and stowed it away in his wallet.

"You can depend upon the wife and I doing all we can for you!" the father asserted.

Then, as a proof of how highly he esteemed the rancher, he stood treat, which was a rare occurrence with him.

The liquor dispatched, Wallace departed.

CHAPTER VII.

A MISTAKE.

No sooner was the rancher gone than the landlord made haste to summon his wife and make known to her the liberal offer which had been made.

Mrs. Anderson, fully as greedy for money as her husband, was delighted at the prospect.

"A thousand dollars! Well, that is something like!" she declared. "Do you know, Pop, I always thought that Wallace was very much of a gentleman."

"Yes, and he is willing to do the square thing with us."

"Put a hundred dollars right up, did he?"

"Here's the cash!" and the landlord showed his "better half" the ten-dollar bills.

"Well, now, that is something like!" she declared. "That is the kind of man that I like to have 'round. The girl is bound to go off and marry somebody one of these days, and as long as she has got to go, we might as well get something for her."

"Yes, that was my idea, so we must do all we can for Wallace; we must put in a good word for him whenever we can, but we want to work the thing slyly, so as not to have Maggie suspect, for if she had any idea that we were going to make anything out of it, she might be just contrary enough to kick over the traces."

"Yes, that is so; girls like Maggie like to make their own matches."

"But I say, this Wallace is one of her favorites, isn't he?"

"Well, he used to be, but since this Sandy MacAlpine came to town, I kinder think Maggie likes him best."

The landlord gave a sniff of contempt.

"Sandy MacAlpine, indeed!" he cried. "He is a nice sort of a fellow for a girl like Maggie to take up with! Why, the tramp is as poor as a church mouse! All he has is that farm, and half of that is his partner's."

"And nothing but a dug-out for a house, too!" Mrs. Anderson added.

"It appears to me that Maggie hasn't got much sense if she passes by a man as well fixed as this rancher for a poor shoot like Sandy MacAlpine."

"Oh, well, young girls take queer notions sometimes!" the woman observed. "But I guess if we play our cards well, that we can manage the matter all right."

"It is a thousand dollars in our pocket if we do!" the old man declared.

And from that time forth neither of the two neglected an opportunity to sing the praise of Alex Wallace upon every opportunity.

Maggie was far superior in sagacity to either of her parents, and it did not take her long to suspect that this praise of the rancher was not accidental.

"Oh, give us a rest, mother!" she exclaimed, abruptly, interrupting Mrs. Anderson's speech wherein she was describing what an excellent fellow Alex Wallace was; through the window she happened to catch sight of the rancher passing on the other side of the street, and took advantage of the opportunity to express her opinion of him.

"Give us a rest, mother!" the girl repeated.

"You fairly make me tired. What on earth has got into your head that you are talking so much about Alex Wallace?"

"Oh, I don't know; just because I happened to see him, I suppose, and that suggested to me what an extremely wise young man he is."

"Oh, it did, did it?" Maggie exclaimed, in decided accents of unbelief. "Come, mother, that is entirely too thin, and you must not think you can fool me so easily. You commenced to talk about Wallace long before you saw him, and how is it that you have so suddenly come to the opinion that he is such a nice fellow? I never heard you say a word in his favor before."

"I have always had a good opinion of him," the old woman declared.

"Maybe you did, but you have kept it mighty quiet, for I never heard you say much of anything about him, except to repeat what paw said once that if he would drink less whisky and did not play poker so much he would have a good deal more money."

"Well, paw was a little hard on him, I guess; young men will be young men, you know."

"Yes, but this Wallace is no chicken!" Maggie declared.

"He is not old, I am sure!"

"And he isn't very young either!"

"He is a gentleman with a fine education!"

"Yes, I know he is somewhat superior to the average Greer county man, and I suppose before he was forced to emigrate, leaving his country for his country's good, he was a bright and shining light in some Eastern town."

"Oh, Maggie, how can you talk that way about such a nice man as Mr. Wallace?" the mother exclaimed. "I am certain that he has never been in any trouble."

"Come, mother, you are putting it on too thick now!" the girl declared. "It is not possible that you can be at all certain about the matter. This Wallace is not the kind of man to seek for fortune in a country like this unless he was obliged to, and, to my thinking, the chances are big that he had to get out from the East in a hurry."

"You are really a dreadful girl, Maggie, to talk that way!" the mother declared. "And I thought that Mr. Wallace too was a great favorite of yours."

"Oh, I like the man well enough," the girl replied, in an indifferent way, "but then there are others that I like just as well, Sandy MacAlpine, for instance."

The mother threw up her hands as if amazed by the declaration.

"Now, Maggie, you don't really mean it?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I do, he is a real nice fellow!"

"But awfully poor!"

"Well, he has come here to grow up with the country," the girl replied, with a laugh. "Just you wait for fifteen or twenty years and then he will be well fixed."

"You surely wouldn't think of marrying such a fellow as Sandy MacAlpine?" the mother exclaimed.

"Would you be willing that I should marry Alex Wallace?" Maggie demanded.

"Yes, I am sure, because I think he is a nice man, and I know he is able to take good care of you."

"You are not certain about that!" Maggie retorted.

"They were saying about the town only a little while ago that he had lost a deal of money and if things didn't mend with him that he would soon be broke."

"Those stories are all a pack of lies, my dear; he has plenty of money. Why, only yesterday, he paid old Goldsburg two thousand dollars, and lifted a mortgage which the Jew held against him, and he has plenty of money besides."

"How is it that you happen to know all these particulars?" asked the girl abruptly.

"Oh, well, your paw hears all the news that is going, of course," the old woman replied, evasively.

"Of course!" Maggie repeated, sarcastically, "and I don't suppose Alex Wallace has been to see you and paw and told you just how rich he was just to get you on his side?"

"I am sure he has never said anything to me!" Mrs. Anderson declared.

"No, but he has talked to paw, and that is the same thing. I suppose he thinks he is smart!" the girl exclaimed, contemptuously. "But I can just tell him that he had better mind what he is about. If he wants to catch me he had better set about it himself, and not try to have me influenced through other people."

"Oh, Lordy!" the old woman exclaimed, "no one who knows you will ever try to influence you! You are too high-strung. You are like the Irishman's pig: the only way they could get him to go to Dublin was by telling him he was on the road to Cork. If I wanted you to do anything I would just set my foot down that you should not do it, and then you would be bound to go contrary."

"Oh, no, I am not quite so bad as all that!" the girl declared. "But Alex Wallace mustn't try to play sharp with me, and I will tell him so too the first time I meet him."

"Why, he hasn't tried to, I am sure."

"Oh, yes, he has! I understand the game as well as though I had been present when he had the talk with paw. Both you and he are just dead gone after money, and this smart Alex has made some bargain with you—probably offered to give so much money if you would put in a good word for him whenever you can, but it will not work! The scheme will not do him a bit of good, and won't I give him a piece of my mind when I see him!"

Mrs. Anderson labored long to convince her daughter that she was wrong in this surmise, but Maggie was positive, and so at last the mother gave it up as a bad job, but she still continued to put in a good word for the rancher whenever she could.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DECOY LETTER.

AFTER he had finished his breakfast the Lone Hand loitered around the saloon for a half-hour or more, talking with the landlord and with the loungers who dropped in.

The general subject of conversation was the bold robbery which had been committed by the Red Wolves of Wichita upon the old Jew on the preceding evening, and, to the surprise of the Lone Hand, he found that there was a strong feeling of doubt among the citizens in regard to the matter.

There was a goodly number who did not believe the Jew had been robbed at all, and these men did not hesitate to express the opinion openly.

Goldsbury was the principal money-lender of the section, doing a sort of pawnbroker business in fact, always ready to advance money if the applicant had collaterals of value to put up for the loan, and, as a natural result, he was extremely unpopular; few of the citizens liked him, and yet, in the opinion of the man-hunter, this was hardly strong enough reason why the majority of the citizens should believe that the story of the robbery was a falsehood, and that the old man had not been robbed at all.

"There is something wrong about this," he murmured, as he lounged in a corner of the saloon, listening to the townsmen discuss the case.

"There is no doubt that there is a band of outlaws known as the Red Wolves of the Wichita, and that they have operated in this region. Why, then, should these men come to the conclusion that Goldsbury lied about the matter, and that no robbery has taken place?"

"There is a reason for it, of course. Have these outlaws agents and confederates right here in the town—have these confederates started the tale that the Jew is lying about the matter so as to head off any attempt to organize a pursuit?"

"Upon my word it looks extremely like it; and, in that case, I shall not have to go to the Wichita Mountains to find my men, since I can probably strike them right in the town."

"I must keep my eyes open."

The man-hunter meditated upon the subject for a few moments.

"If the Red Wolves have their confederates in the town here the chances are great that a watch will be kept upon Goldsbury, so that the gang will have timely warning if any attempt is made to organize a pursuit."

"I must call upon the Jew, and remain there long enough to excite the suspicion of the watchers. Luckily, I have this other bit of business to which I must attend, so I will have an excuse for staying some time in Goldsbury's store."

After having come to this conclusion, the Lone Hand left the hotel, and went up the street to Goldsbury's place.

Naturally, as a stranger would, he gazed around him as he walked up the street, and when he came near the Jew's place of business, his keen eyes noted all the surroundings.

There were ten or twelve men in the street, either going about their business, or collected in groups busy in conversation.

They stared at the stranger, but, as far as the Lone Hand could see, none of them presented a suspicious appearance.

He entered the store.

As it happened, no customers were within, and the old Jew came forward eagerly to meet him.

"Ah, my good friend, I am so glad to see you!" Goldsbury declared.

The Lone Hand nodded in return, and then took a look around him.

The store did not differ in its appearance from the usual country shop; there was a counter running along one side, and at the beginning of the counter, nearest the door, was a sort of desk, placed on the end of the counter, and nailed in.

On the top of the desk was a set of rudely constructed pigeon-holes, and as the Jewess, Rebecca, sat at the desk, the man-hunter understood at once that this was the post-office.

Behind the girl, hanging on the wall, was a board with tapes stretched across it after the fashion of a card-rack, and sticking in the tapes were half a dozen letters.

"This is der post-office," the old Jew remark-

ed, as he noticed that the Lone Hand's gaze was directed at the desk.

"So I supposed; rather a primitive arrangement."

"Yes, but it answers," the Jewess replied.

"We only have a mail once a week."

"How soon does it come in?"

"To-morrow."

"That will suit me nicely."

Then the Lone Hand threw a quick glance through the store door, so as to make sure that no one was playing the spy upon him in that direction, and as not a soul was in sight, he drew a letter from his pocket, and handed it to Rebecca.

"Can you contrive to put the mark on the stamp in such a way that no one will be able to make out what it is—blur it, you know?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, without any trouble. You wish the letter to appear as if it had come through the post-office?"

"Yes. There must not be anything about the letter to excite suspicion that it is a decoy."

The girl arranged her stamp, and succeeded in putting a mark upon the letter which would have puzzled the keenest eyes to make out.

"That will do nicely," the Lone Hand remarked, when the girl held the letter up for his inspection. "Now what do you do with your mail when it comes?"

"The letters for people that I know I put in the pigeon-holes, and those for strangers go in the rack, so that anybody can see if there is any mail without having to ask."

"Ah, yes, I see. Now to-morrow, after the mail arrives, contrive to slip this letter in with the rest, and when you put it in the rack be careful to put it in a prominent position, and if it is called for be sure to take particular notice of the man who gets it, so that you can give me a description of him. You will not forget this?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Do not fear to trust mine child!" Goldsbury exclaimed. "She will do der trick right up to der handle."

"I have no doubt of it!" the Lone Hand declared, with a gallant bow to the girl, who smiled and slightly blushed.

"And now, mine dear friend, what do you think about mine affair?" the old Jew asked.

"Well, I don't really know; of course, it is too soon yet for me to make any move."

"Ah, yesh, of course, I understand dot. Mine gootness! it was der heaviest blow dot I ever received!" and Goldsbury heaved a deep sigh.

"Yes, and do you know that a good many of the people of the town have got the idea into their heads that it is all some game of yours and that you have not been robbed at all?" the Lone Hand observed.

"Mine gootness!" cried the old man, in astonishment, "you don't tell me dot?"

"Yes, it is the truth. I think that from the talk I have heard about the matter that it is safe to say that fully nine out of every ten men in the place do not take any stock in your story at all. They are not willing to believe that you have been robbed, but think you got the story up so as to lead people to think that you are not prospering."

"Oh, mine gootness! what a ridiculous idea!" Goldsbury declared. "Why should I do a thing like dot?"

"Only to put on a poor mouth, as these men say, to keep people from thinking that you are getting rich too rapidly."

"Mine gootness! of all der foolish talk dot I ever heard this is der worst!" the old Jew declared.

"Why, there has been twenty men here to see how the door was burst in; der marks are on it as plain as can be."

"Oh, yes, but they think that you did that yourself!" the Lone Hand explained. "Of course, that is not impossible."

"But, mine dear friend, you do not take any stock in this fool talk?" Goldsbury exclaimed, anxiously. "You came in right after der Red Wolves went away, and could see mit your own eyes dot it was no game of mine."

The old Jew had suddenly got the idea that if the man-hunter believed the story he would not bother himself about the matter, and so he was anxious.

"Oh, no, I am satisfied that your story is perfectly correct," the Lone Hand replied. "The condition in which I found you and your daughter was proof enough to convince me, although I did not see the rascals."

"I do not think they had been gone ten minutes when you came," Goldsbury declared.

"Oh, I am sure it was not ten minutes," the Jewess added. "Because when you came to the door we thought it was the robbers coming back."

"Yes, dot was so!" the old Jew exclaimed. "Could you not tell when you came in mit der door dot I was all in a tremble?"

"Oh, yes, I remember, and now the question is, who started this report, and why was it started?"

"Sir, do you not think that it is possible that these robbers have some friends in the town, and they have talked in this way so as to render

it difficult for my father to get any one to go in pursuit of the outlaws?" Rebecca asked, jumping to this conclusion immediately, with all a woman's shrewdness.

"Mine gootness! maybe dot ish so!" Goldsbury exclaimed. "I never thought of dot. One thing is certain, although I told der boys dot I would pay well if some of them would get up a gang for to go after der robbers, nobody seems willing to start in der matter."

"The doubt that has been thrown upon your story accounts for that," the Lone Hand remarked. "The majority of the men in the town believe that if they started to hunt up the robbers they would be simply going on a wild-goose chase—a fool's errand, in fact."

"Yesh, yesh, I see, der game was well worked; but smart as these rascals are, they do not suspect dot a man like you will soon take a hand mit der fun, and then they will laugh on de odder side of their mouths."

"It is the unexpected that always happens," the man-hunter observed in his quiet way.

Then a sudden idea occurred to the old Jew and he immediately became alarmed.

"If this is so what you think—if this story was started to head off der pursuit it shows dot the Red Wolves hafe friends right here in Greenville!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that," the Lone Hand replied.

"Mine gootness! will they not be apt to go for me because I hafe made some troubles about this matter?" Goldsbury cried.

"Well, if they should it would give me a chance to catch them," the man-hunter remarked, smiling at the alarm of the old man.

"Yesh, dot ish so, but these desperadoes might kill me!"

"Oh, no, not much danger of that, particularly when I am in the town to look after you," the Lone Hand replied reassuringly. "Don't go out of the way to borrow trouble. It is my opinion that there isn't any danger of these fellows making an attack upon you."

"Well, well, I hope not," the old Jew remarked. "It ish bad to lose so big a sum as two thousand dollars, but, mine gootness! I would rather let the monish go, and say no more about it, if I thought der Red Wolves would come after me."

"Don't worry yourself about that; they will not be apt to strike you without warning, and if you see anything suspicious you must send me word at once. I shall lounge around the hotel for a few days and keep my eyes open."

"Yesh, yesh I will send der moment I see dot there is anything wrong."

Then the Lone Hand quitted the store and sauntered down the street to the hotel again.

As usual he had his eyes about him, although from his manner no one would have been apt to suppose he was on the watch, and he fancied that a big, burly, rough-looking fellow was paying more attention to his movements than a stranger should.

"Oho! have I got a bite already?" he muttered.

CHAPTER IX.

CALLED TO AN ACCOUNT.

MAGGIE ANDERSON meant what she said when she declared that she would give Alex Wallace a piece of her mind in regard to the smart trick he had played in getting the old folks on his side.

She soon had an opportunity.

About two o'clock he came in to the restaurant to get something to eat.

He waited purposely until all the rest of the boarders had got their meals so as to be able to have a chance to converse with the girl without interruption.

She took his order and after it was served began a conversation.

"I suppose, Mr. Wallace, that you think you are a very smart fellow?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, I don't know about that; I probably have as good an opinion of myself as most men, and really I don't think that is a fault, although from the way in which you speak I get the idea that you do not think a man ought to think well of himself."

"I don't mean that, and I reckon you know what I mean well enough!" exclaimed Maggie, crossly.

"Upon my word I don't know what you are driving at. I can see that something has happened to vex you, but, as far as I know, I haven't done anything."

"Oh, you haven't?"

"No, have I?"

"What have you been saying to my paw?"

"About you?"

"Yes, about me, of course!"

"Well, now, really, I don't think I ought to tell you."

"You better, unless you want to quarrel with me!"

"That is about the last thing in the world that I am desirous of doing, so I suppose I will have to explain."

"Yes, I think you had better make a clean breast of it; that is, if you know when you are well off!" Maggie exclaimed, in a spiteful way.

"Well, I didn't say much about you, and

what I said I am willing to stand by," the rancher replied. "I told your old man that I thought you were the nicest girl in Texas—in fact I rather think I went so far as to say in the whole United States—"

"Oh, bother!" Maggie cried, impatiently. "I did not mean anything of that kind!"

"Didn't you want me to tell you what I said?" Wallace exclaimed, affecting to be astonished.

"You know that I don't care for your taffy!"

"Perhaps you prefer some other fellow's taffy?"

"No, what do you suppose I care about any such nonsense?"

"It is not nonsense; it is the truth!"

"That is all right! you may be able to make a fool of other girls but you can't play the game on me!" Maggie declared. "What I want to know is what arrangement did you make with my paw and maw?"

"Arrangement?" the rancher said, in a tone of question.

"Yes, it isn't of any use for you to deny it, for I know you must have come to some understanding with them or else they never would take such a decided stand for you."

"Ah, they have a favorable opinion of me then?" Well, I am glad of that!" Wallace declared, in the most innocent manner imaginable.

"You know well enough how it comes that they have it!" Maggie retorted. "And if another fellow was to come along and make a trifle better offer they would change their minds in regard to you so quickly that it would make your head swim!"

"Maggie, I regret to see that you have a tendency to descend to slang every now and then, and for a young lady like yourself it is a very bad habit to get into," the rancher remarked, with a reproving shake of the head.

"Oh, brother! don't you dare to lecture me, or I will not talk to you all. The question that I want answered is how on earth did you get at paw and maw to make them both so strong in your favor?"

"Say! do you think it is fair to make me give it away?"

"Who is using slang now?"

"Oh, well, it is not so bad for a man, particularly in an out-of-the-way hole like this."

"You mustn't!"

"I submit to the correction," and Wallace bowed with mock humility.

"Now tell me, how did you work it, and do you think it is wise to make love to a girl's paw and maw rather than to the girl herself?" she asked tartly.

"Oh, come, now, you have no reason to complain on that score. I am sure I have been after you, red-hot, ever since you struck the town!" the other declared. "But in regard to the old folks, don't you think that it is a wise move for a fellow to get them on his side if he can? I don't mean for the purpose of influencing the girl, for I know well enough that with such a contrary piece of humanity as you are, a game of that kind would not work at all; in fact, it would be sure to damage the cause rather than aid it. But I calculated in this way: If I could succeed in winning your consent, your father and mother would be certain to raise a precious row; you are valuable to them, and they will not be inclined to let you go off and get married if they can help it."

"Well, they cannot help themselves when I get ready to go!" the girl replied, decidedly.

"Yes, I know that, but it was my idea to arrange the matter so that it would be pleasant for all parties. Easy does it, you know. Without intending any disrespect for your parents, the fact must be stated that both of them are extremely fond of money."

"Oh, yes, there is no doubt about that," and the rich, full lip of the girl curled in contempt, for she despised avarice.

"To their desire for money I appealed. I told your dad, frankly, that I was going to get you if I could, but explained that I did not think it was right for any one to take you without paying something to your parents."

"Of course paw agreed with you," the girl remarked, contemptuously.

"Most certainly he did, and that showed that his head was level. I told him I was willing to pay him a thousand dollars the day I married you, and put up a hundred dollars right in his hands as a proof that I was in earnest."

The girl opened her big blue eyes wide in astonishment.

"A thousand dollars!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, that was the sum I named, and in proof that I wasn't trying any bluff game I put up the hundred dollars, and showed your respected dad that I had the thousand dollars, and a few hundred besides, right in my pocket."

"No wonder that paw and maw are both on your side!" Maggie declared.

"You can see that I am in dead earnest in this thing, and mean business from the word go!" Wallace remarked.

"Well, I must say that you made an extremely liberal offer, and you must have a deal more money than people give you credit for

having, or else you are growing reckless and don't mind throwing your cash away."

"Well, I am well fixed, so to speak. I have not been running a ranch here three years for nothing, and although there is not much money in the business now, for beeves are down and the settlers are spoiling the ranges, yet I have done mighty well. As to what people say about me, I am not the kind of man who goes around telling my business to every Tom, Dick and Harry," the rancher explained.

"It was my game to lead folks to believe that I was not making a fortune, but now that I am practically out of the business, it does not matter if the truth comes out. I am a rich man, Maggie, and if you make up your mind to become my wife I can give you as fine an outfit as any woman possesses in this section. I am going to give up the ranch, you know, and think of opening a store here in Greenville. It is my idea that this place is going to be the big town of this district, and if I get in at the start I will be apt to make a good thing out of it. This old Jew, Goldsburg, is not popular, and there is room for another store here, anyway."

"Yes, I think you are right; it seems to me that you ought to make a good thing out of it," the girl remarked, slowly and reflectively.

"Well, that is the way it looks to me, and I am going in to try it, and now, Maggie, if you could only make up your mind to marry me I don't think that you would ever regret it."

The girl shook her head and her face wore a troubled expression.

"Don't be in a hurry, you know, take plenty of time to think over the matter," Wallace urged. "I don't expect you to give me an answer right away. I am patient—I can wait."

"Alex, you have been frank and honest with me, and I will try to be equally frank and honest with you!" the girl exclaimed, abruptly.

"Well, that is just what I want!" the rancher declared. "I always try to do business square and aboveboard, and that is the way I want people to act with me."

"Yes, that is the proper way," Maggie replied, slowly. "Well, I am much obliged to you for your offer, and, as far as money goes—if that was all I was looking for—I don't suppose I could do as well, as to take you. Now, there isn't much romance about me, paw and maw have hammered into my head ever since I was old enough to know what money was, and I understand that when a girl gets married she is very foolish if she doesn't select a man who will be able to take good care of her."

"Your head is level there!"

"Now, I will admit that I like you just about as well as I do any one."

"That's good!"

"Hold on a bit! let me finish, and then, maybe, you will not think it is good, but the trouble is that there are three or four others whom I like just about as well as I do you."

"Oh, is that so?" exclaimed the rancher, making a grimace.

"Yes, and that is where the trouble comes in!" Maggie declared. "I cannot make up mind as to which particular one of you all I really do like the best, and until that question is settled it would be folly, of course, for me to think of marrying, for just as soon as I passed my word I might discover that I loved some other fellow better and then there would be trouble. When I am with you I think I like you the best, but when another comes along I conclude that really I like him a little better than I do you, and so it goes. I suppose I will make up my mind about the matter some time, but until I do, I ought not to promise myself to any one, although I will admit that as far as the money goes, none of the rest can touch you."

"As I said before, Maggie, I am in no hurry, and as I have faith that you will decide in my favor one of these days I am willing to wait."

Wallace replied in the most contented manner.

By this time the rancher had finished his meal, as he had not allowed the conversation to interfere materially with eating, and rose to depart.

"All I ask, Maggie, is a fair field, no favor and may the best man win, and I reckon that the best man is a fellow about my size."

The girl laughed and Wallace departed.

CHAPTER X.

WHISPERING BEN.

THE pleasant expression upon the face of the rancher vanished after he had quitted the hotel and a dark look came over his features as he walked slowly up the street.

"The game is clear to me now, thanks to the frank way in which she spoke," he muttered.

"But she has tried to deceive me in one particular. There are no three or four suitors whom she looks upon with equal favor. I know better than that. The race is narrowed down to two. I have only one rival, and that is this settler, Sandy MacAlpine. She hesitates to choose between us, yet I can give her plenty of money, while this MacAlpine is as poor as poverty. That shows that she really likes MacAlpine a little better than she does me, or else my money would turn the scale in my favor."

"In a matter of this kind I believe in always trying to look at the facts exactly as they are.

A man is a fool to try to twist them around to suit himself.

"To begin then: MacAlpine, at present, stands better with the girl than I do, but the advantage in his favor is very slight; if he should suddenly acquire wealth he would be apt to win the trick, but there isn't one chance out of a thousand of that happening."

"If MacAlpine was out of the way there is hardly a doubt that the girl would decide in my favor, particularly if he cleared out without saying anything to her, or trying to get a promise that she would remain true to him until his return. But he is not likely to do anything of the kind unless—" and the speaker came to a sudden stop while a dark look came over his face.

"I am badly situated just at present," he continued after a long pause. "I don't see how the trick can be worked. I need assistance, and there is no man in this section, that I know of, who would be able to do what must be done."

By this time Wallace had got clear to the outskirts of the town and was pacing slowly along in moody meditation, his eyes fixed upon the ground.

A horseman rode up the trail at a walk, and when he espied the rancher he fixed his eyes upon him intently, then studied his face as though he thought the owner of it was no stranger to him.

When he arrived within a dozen paces of Wallace the new-comer pulled his horse to a halt and saluted the rancher with a loud "Hello!"

Wallace raised his eyes, came to a stand-still, and surveyed the horseman.

He saw a medium-sized man, clad in the usual rough garments common to the border, with a long, sallow face, lit up by a pair of remarkable keen, gray eyes, he was an odd-looking customer, and the strangest thing about him was his hair, which was streaked, quite dark at the ends and much lighter near the head. A stubby beard covered his chin which was also streaked like his hair.

"I reckon you and I ain't strangers to each other," the horseman remarked with a grin of recognition.

"No, I reckon not, and do you know I was just thinking of you, and that recalls the old adage, talk of the devil—"

"And he appears! ha, ha, ha!" laughed the horseman. "Well, it is rather odd, isn't it?"

"Yes, for you are about the last man in the world whom I expected to meet down in this region."

"A good many hundred miles from our old stamping grounds," the stranger remarked.

"That is true, and I suppose you had good reasons for coming to this jumping-off place of execution?"

"Oh, yes, just the same as the most of the men who have come out here to grow up with the country, but you have no idea how averse my friends were to letting me come. I fairly had to leave between two days, as the saying is, or I don't believe I should have gotten away at all," and then the horseman indulged in a hearty laugh in which the rancher joined.

"You have just arrived, I take it?"

"Yes, came over from Mangum this morning. I didn't see any opening there for me, and as everybody seemed to think that Greenville was having a boom I thought I would try my luck here."

"Well, I am glad you have come, for I have done finely here and need just such a man as you are."

"That is lucky now, isn't it? And to think that we two old pals should stumble on each other way, down in this heathen country."

"Yes, it is odd."

"Let me see—it is about four years since we parted!"

"Yes, just about."

"How may I call your name? Since I have been in Texas I have discovered that it is always good policy to ask a man how he calls himself, and never to presume to think that because you have met the man before in another State that you know what his handle is, as they say down in these parts."

"Yes, that is about right. My name is Alexander Wallace, and I run the Triangle Ranch, which is situated about ten miles up the river."

"Ah, yes, I see; and undoubtedly you are one of the first citizens of the district."

"Yes, I reckon I stand as well as anybody in the county."

"No doubt—no doubt, and I can tell you that I am glad to hear it, for I am about cleaned out," the horseman answered. "My name, by the way, is Benjamin Armstrong: Whispering Ben I am sometimes called by my intimate friends, who know me well. The nickname applied because there is a tradition that I am so gifted as a talker that I can coax a bird out of a bush, or, as an Irishman would remark, can lie the legs off of an iron pot, and then swear the bottom out afterward."

"It is evident that your acquaintances have a high opinion of your abilities in that line," Wallace observed, with a smile.

"Yes, and, to do them justice, I must say that I do not think their estimate is much too

high of my humble self," the other replied, with an air that plainly indicated he would never be hung for his modesty in trumpeting his own merits.

"You would hardly think that I was one of the eastern high-flyers—a regular top-roller, to see me in these duds," the man continued, shaking his head with a melancholy air as he looked at his coarse garments."

"Oh, well, clothing doesn't make the man."

"I don't know about that," the other rejoined, quickly. "I have had considerable experience in this world of sorrow, and I think I may say, without exaggeration, that I have seen as much of life since I have sojourned in this vale of tears as any man of my years who now walks the earth; and the more I see, the more I am convinced that there is a deal of truth in the old saying, 'money makes the man, the want of it, the fellow.'"

"Oh, yes, I agree with you, but down in this country it doesn't make much difference how a man is rigged out. In nine cases out of ten the cowboy at twenty or thirty dollars a month, dresses better, and puts on more style, than the master of the ranch, who can count his money by the thousands."

"Very true; this is just the country for the man who is down on his luck to rustle around in, as they say in this delightful State of Texas, because if his clothes are shabby no one will take any notice of the fact, on the same principle that they sent young Hamlet to England, when it was feared that he was losing his wits. As the English were all mad themselves his little trouble in that line would not be observed."

"But to come down to solid business," he added, abruptly. "Do you really mean to say that you have got any opening for a man of genius about my size?"

"Of course; I meant what I said when I remarked that I was just thinking of you when you rode up. Just thinking that you were the man of all men whom I would like to see."

"On business of course, for men of our stamp don't waste time in any nonsense," the horseman remarked.

"Certainly, that is what I meant. I have got a splendid opening for you, and, if you were to go in with me, I can assure you that in a short time you will be in full feather again."

"That is what I want, for upon my word, my dear old pal, it is an extremely unpleasant thing for a man of ability, like myself—not to put it too strongly and say a genius—to be reduced to the disagreeable necessity of earning my bread by vulgar labor!" the other declared with a lofty air.

"I can understand that, for I don't believe that you ever did ten honest days' work in your life!" the rancher remarked, bluntly.

Whispering Ben was not at all offended by the frankness of the speech.

On the contrary a pleasant smile of gratified vanity appeared upon his face, and it was plain that he took the words of the other to be a compliment.

"Oh, no, I have not been quite so fortunate as that," he remarked. "I have had to put in a good many days in that disagreeable way at intervals during my somewhat checkered career, but I am proud to say, never did I submit except under strong compulsion."

"I can readily believe that."

"Yes, when I get in a tight place, such as I am at present, as I will frankly admit to you. Old pal! would you believe that all the wealth I have in the world is limited to a single dollar?"

"Is it as hard as that?"

"It is a sure enough fact, as one of these delightful Westerners would remark."

"True, I hold the fee-simple of this remarkable steed," he continued, shaking his head in a sad way as he glanced at the mustang, which was indeed a sorry-looking beast.

"Well, he would fetch about ten dollars."

"Yes, so there is eleven good, hard plunks between my noble self and starvation. I had to give up my blankets in Mangum in order to get out of the town, and you know how absolutely necessary blankets are to a man roughing it in a country like this, where in the infernal dog-houses that they call hotels they charge a man four bits for sleeping on the bare floor. But either the blankets or the horse had to go, and as I never was good at the shank's mare business, I gave up the blankets."

"You are all right now; you can draw on me for what you want."

"Ah, thanks! 'your pains are written where every day I turn the page to read,' and he made a low bow to the rancher.

This man, despite his shabby garments and unprepossessing appearance, had an extremely captivating way with him; talked with the fluency of a highly-educated man, and the ease and grace of a polished gentleman.

"One touch of kindness makes the whole world akin!" Whispering Ben continued. "That isn't the exact quotation, but, to my thinking, it is just as good as the original."

"Yes, so it is; but I say, Ben, how comes it that a man of your genius should be strapped?" the rancher inquired. "Of course, it is natural for any man who takes chances, as you do, to

run short once in a while, but you ought to be able to pull out easily enough."

"My dear old pal, this is not the country for a man like myself to operate in," the other replied. "Down in this God-forsaken region I am the square peg in the round hole. You know that I never was a man of action; my gift is in the use of my tongue, and when I try another lay, as I have sometimes been compelled to do, about half the time I make a complete failure. If I was a gambler, or a man of metal who, upon a pinch, could do a little road-agent business, I might be able to get along, but, I tell you the man who comes down to a country like this and goes in to make a living by trying to talk these rough fellows out of their wealth, has an awful hard row to hoe. If you doubt the truth of my statement, just cast your eyes over me and see the extremity to which I am reduced."

"Oh, yes, I know how the thing works."

"Then, in a civilized land, when a man is induced by 'trick and device' to part with his ducats, and discovers that he has been fooled, he rushes off to a magistrate for a warrant; the machinery of the law begins to work, and a man of genius, like myself, can usually manage to wriggle out of the trouble by the aid of a good criminal lawyer, but in this barbarous country, if by some smart trick you succeed in skinning a man out of ten dollars, the moment he discovers that he has been plucked, he goes for his revolver, and it is either give up the ducats or die."

"Oh, I tell you, old pal, this is no climate for a man in my line!"

"To a certain extent you are right," Wallace observed. "You cannot work alone, but if you go in with me, I will insure that you can make plenty of money, and you need not fear either the law—with which we are not much troubled in this county—or personal violence, of which there is a heap."

"Oh, I am with you, old pal, you can bet your life on that! You always had a genius for planning, and though in the old time things did not turn out exactly as they should, yet it was not your fault. You planned the battle magnificently, and if you were not successful, it was because fate entered the field upon the other side, and even a Napoleon was crushed by fate."

"Let me see," said the rancher reflectively, "you will have to fix yourself up a little, for you are too much run down even to pass in this country."

"That is true enough," the other observed, with a glance at his weather-beaten clothes and a doleful shake of the head. "If I were asked now if I was acquainted with Whispering Ben, like the fellow in the play I should exclaim: 'Myself and misery know the man!'"

Wallace took out his roll of money, selected five tens and gave them to the horseman, whose eyes sparkled with delight as he noticed the size of the roll.

"The sight of those ducats is as good for my orbs as a dose of eye-water!" he declared.

"There is fifty dollars; go to the old Jew who keeps the store and rig yourself out so you will pass muster; you don't want anything fancy, you know, but good, plain, substantial things. You are a speculator, you see, who has come to Greenville because you heard the town was on the boom, and you are ready to put ducats into anything that is good."

"Ah, yes, I see; fear not but I will work the game to the queen's taste."

"And, by the way, while you are in the Jew's store—Goldsburg is his name—just keep your ears open, for you may pick up some information that may be of value."

"All right, I will not forget."

"And now, let me see: you must have some place to stop in the town, and it will not do for you to go to the hotel, for then I would not be able to talk with you without exciting attention, and it will be absolutely necessary that we should be able to confer together."

"Yes, or else we cannot do any business."

"I have it!" Wallace exclaimed, after thinking over the matter for a moment.

"You go ahead up the street until you come to Comanche Charley's saloon, The Cowboy's Home. You will see the sign. Put your horse in the corral and then go in to get a drink. I will drop in, just by accident, you know, and you can greet me as an old acquaintance, tell how you have come to Greenville to take advantage of the boom, and ask me where you had better hang out. Comanche Charley has a room which he lets out once in a while when the right sort of a man comes along, and I will recommend you to stay right where you are, telling the saloon-keeper that you are an old pard of mine, who can be trusted to mind your own business and not to interfere with what does not concern you."

"I infer from this that Comanche Charley and his Cowboy's Home is a little off color," Whispering Ben remarked, with a knowing wink.

"Yes, he will take a trick every time, if the circumstances are such that it can be worked without danger of detection, and he has always managed so carefully that his place has as good a name as any saloon in the town, and no one,

except the men who are right onto it, have any suspicion that there is anything crooked about either the man or his place."

"You don't want it known commonly that we are old pals?" the other questioned.

"No, it is better that it should appear as if we were strangers, accidentally brought together, and when I tell Comanche that I want the thing kept quiet, you can depend upon it that he will not give it away. But go on with you, for some one may spot us in conversation."

"All right!"

The horseman rode along until he came to the saloon with the sign "The Cowboy's Home," then, after placing his horse in the corral, he entered.

CHAPTER XI.

COMANCHE CHARLEY.

THE Cowboy's Home was a one-story frame shanty like the majority of the buildings in the town; the saloon occupied the front part, and there were four small rooms in the rear.

The keeper of the place was a medium-sized, thick-set fellow, with a complexion almost as dark as an Indian, and as he wore his coarse, jet-black hair long, coming down to his shoulders, he presented a savage appearance which easily accounted for the name he bore.

Then, too, he was heavily armed, so much so that even in a wild country like the one of which we write, where it was the custom to carry weapons openly, and the man who did not go armed with revolvers and a big bowie-knife belted to his waist was the exception, not the rule, his display of the "engines of war" was so great as to attract attention; so it was no wonder that plain Charley Smith was seldom heard, and that Comanche Charley was looked upon as one of the "bad" men of the county.

And probably the fact that he bore such an evil reputation was the reason why he seldom had any trouble.

Bearing the reputation of being a man who was always ready for war—who really delighted in blood and slaughter, it was generally believed that the man who made up his mind to pick a quarrel with this blood-thirsty fighter might as well select his burial spot, and make his funeral arrangements beforehand.

There were doubters and scoffers, of course, a few malignant souls, who insinuated that the saloon-keeper was not half so great a warrior as he appeared—that, like the Chinese fighting-men, he relied upon a fierce outward appearance to scare the enemy, and if he was put to the test, it would be found he was not half so desperate a fellow as was reported.

There were no customers in the saloon when Whispering Ben entered; Comanche Charley sat behind the bar, smoking a pipe.

The stranger nodded in the affable way peculiar to him, but the saloon-keeper returned the salutation in a surly manner, evidently not favorably impressed by the appearance of the other.

"How are you?" said Whispering Ben, who was too old a stager to be put out by a cool reception. "I think I will try a little whisky, if you have got a first-class article that you feel you can recommend to a gentleman."

"As good fire-water as you kin find in the hull State of Texas!" Comanche Charley declared, as he set out a glass and took a bottle from the shelf behind him, but as Whispering Ben reached for the bottle, the saloon-keeper drew it back.

"Hold on a moment, stranger!" he exclaimed. "Jist have the kindness to produce yer ducats! Lemme see the color of yer rocks!"

"Great heavens! does it kill as quickly as that?" Whispering Ben exclaimed, apparently in profound astonishment.

"W'ot do you mean?" growled the saloon-keeper, who being a rather dull-witted fellow, failed to comprehend the joke.

"Why, as you are anxious to get your money in advance, the natural inference is that your whisky is so powerful that after a man drinks, it lays him out so quickly that he has no time to pay," the other explained.

"You think you are durned funny, don't you?" exclaimed Comanche Charley, who had a poor opinion of all jokers.

"Well, I ain't afeard that the whisky will lay you out, but I am skeered that if I let you git the lick down yer gullet afore I git the money out of you that, mebbe, I will have to whistle for my silver."

"Whistle, and I'll come to you, my lad," hummed the New Yorker in his bright and airy way, a proceeding which caused the saloon-keeper to glare at him as though he thought the other was not quite right in his mind.

"Don't you worry about the cash," Whispering Ben continued. And then with the air of a millionaire he cast a silver dollar upon the bar. "Take it out of that, and join me in a bowl. You will find that I am one of the right sort when you come to get acquainted with me!"

Comanche Charley took up the coin and examined it in the most surprising way, rung it on the counter and then bit it.

"Oh, that is all right," the other remarked. "I wish I had a thousand of them!"

At this point Alex Wallace entered the saloon. Whispering Ben examined him for a moment and then exclaimed:

"Well, upon my word, if this isn't a surprise! Why, Wallace, old man, how are you?" and then he shook hands with the rancher as though he hadn't seen him for an age.

"Where on earth did you spring from and what are you doing down here?" Wallace inquired.

"Oh, just prospecting around; on the lookout for a chance to make some coin. Will you have a bowl with us?"

"Don't care if I do. This is an old pard of mine, Comanche," Wallace said to the saloon-keeper. "One of the right sort, and a man you can depend upon, although he seems to be a little under the weather now."

"Oh that is all right!" Whispering Ben exclaimed. And then, assuming a mysterious air, he continued:

"It is all a little game of mine. I got myself up in this way for a certain purpose," and then he hesitated, and looked at the landlord as though he was in doubt whether it was prudent for him to say more.

"You need not be afraid to speak before Comanche," Wallace declared. "He is one of the right sort, and can be trusted."

"I am glad to hear it," Whispering Ben exclaimed. "Well, I put on these old togs so I could spy out the land without exciting suspicion, and if I came across a good thing I was ready to go in for it, but it was my calculation to play the game alone, for I had no idea I would run across any old pals down in this country."

"Yes, it was rather odd that we should meet," Wallace remarked. "But, by the way, I have not introduced you to Comanche here yet."

"No, although we have struck up a sort of an acquaintance," the New Yorker remarked.

"This is Comanche Charley, the squarest man of his inches in Texas, and his saloon here, the Cowboy's Home, is headquarters for men like you and I, who know enough to take a trick when we see one, and yet are smart enough to keep the thing to ourselves. Comanche, this is my old pard, Benjamin Armstrong, commonly called Whispering Ben, on account of possessing the gift of the gab in so great a degree that he has been known to talk big sums of money right out of other men's pockets into his own."

The pair acknowledged the introduction in a suitable manner, and then the saloon-keeper remarked:

"Wa-al, talking ain't much in my line, but I reckon sich a thing comes in mighty handy to a man once in a while."

"I tell you, Ben, I am glad to see you," the rancher declared. "For I reckon I know a trick or two that we can work together which will be certain to put some ducats in our pockets."

"That is what I want," the New Yorker remarked.

"By the way, where are you going to hang out?" Wallace asked.

"I don't know. I have not selected a roosting-place yet," the other replied.

"Can't you make room for him here, Comanche?" the rancher asked.

"Oh, yes, I reckon so, as long as he is a friend of yours, and I hope that if you strike anything big you will let me in for a share," the saloon-keeper remarked.

"Yes, yes, we will not forget a man about your size, you can depend upon that!"

And so it was arranged that Whispering Ben was to take up his quarters at the Cowboy's Home.

"And now I think I will go after some new togs," the New Yorker remarked. "This isn't the country for a man to put on much style in, but my garments are really too bad to pass muster even in this region."

"You can get a new outfit at the old Jew's up the street, but lookout, for he is a wildcat, claws and all, and will skin you if he can," Wallace remarked.

"I will keep my eyes peeled; you can depend upon that," Whispering Ben replied.

CHAPTER XII.

PLOT AND COUNTER-PLOT.

THE New Yorker proceeded to Goldsburg's store. There were a couple of customers in the place, upon whom the old Jew was waiting, and so Whispering Ben stopped at the desk behind which the Jewess sat.

His attention was attracted by the pigeon holes and the letter rack.

"Aha! this is the post-office, I suppose," he remarked with a polite bow to Rebecca.

The sharp-eyed Jewess took a look at the stranger and immediately saw that, despite the roughness of his dress, he was no common man.

"Yes, sir, this is the post-office," she replied. "Do you expect any mail?"

"Oh, no, my trip up here is a rather sudden one, and I have not yet communicated with my friends in regard to my whereabouts," he replied. "I have been roughing it now for about three months, as you might judge from the looks of my clothes, and so have been cut-off from my acquaintances; it is possible though that some-

body over in Mangum might drop me a line for I told some parties over there that it was my intention to take up my quarters for a while in Greenville, so if any letters come for Benjamin Armstrong just hold on to them, for that is my name."

"Yes, sir, I will remember."

"By the way, are there any more Armstrongs in the town?"

"No, sir, none that I know of," the girl replied, after thinking over the matter for a moment.

"Well, it is not a very common name."

By this time, the other customers had satisfied their wants, and old Goldsburg hastened to wait upon the New Yorker.

He selected the clothing he wanted, and after a wrangle with the storekeeper in regard to prices, finally made a bargain with him. While he was paying for the things the mail arrived.

A dozen or so of the townsmen followed the bag into the office, and watched Rebecca while she assorted the letters, placing some in the pigeon-holes, others in the sack on the wall, and a few she delivered to the men who were in waiting.

Whispering Ben, with his bundle under his arm, sauntered down to the desk and watched the proceeding for a few minutes.

Then, when the mail was assorted, in company with some new-comers, he stepped up to the rack and read the addresses upon the letters.

"This is a very convenient arrangement," he remarked to the man who stood by his side.

"Wal, I dunno," the other responded in a dubious way, "durned if I have had the luck to git a letter out of it!" and the speaker glared at the rack just as if he thought it was to blame for his ill-luck.

Just at this point a dispute arose between two men at the desk in regard to the post-mark upon a letter which one of them had received, and as this attracted every one's attention, Whispering Ben improved the opportunity to steal a letter from the rack, and this was done so neatly that no one noticed the theft; then the New Yorker took his departure.

He returned to the Cowboy's Home and went to his room, where the rancher was awaiting his return.

"Now for a transformation," Whispering Ben remarked. "I cast aside the grub and become once more the butterfly!"

It only took a few minutes for the New Yorker to make the change.

"There, 'Richard is himself again!'" he declared, and then he took a seat upon the rude bunk in the corner which answered for a bed.

"Yes, you look something like yourself," the other remarked.

"Oh, I was all run down—completely gone to seed, and no mistake, but I will pull up now that I have some chance for my life."

"I can put you in for some good things, and although the game must be worked in an altogether different manner from the way we used to do business, yet it will not take a man like yourself long to get the hang of it."

"I reckon not, to use the vernacular of the natives," the other observed in his easy, confident way. "By the way, that post-office department at the old Jew's store is a peculiar arrangement," he remarked, abruptly.

"Yes, the post-office on these frontier towns does not amount to much. I have known the post-office in a town almost as big as this to be kept in a cigar box on the shelf behind the bar of a saloon, and when a man came in to know if there were any letters for him, the tumbler-juggler handed over the box and bade the applicant look for himself."

"Quite a primitive way of doing business. Greenville is a good deal ahead of that. And I must rise to remark that for men in our line of business it offers some advantage."

"How so?"

"Don't you see it?"

"No, I cannot say that I do."

"You know my old habit of using my eyes; not much escapes me," Whispering Ben remarked in a complacent tone. "Well, while I was in the store the mail came in. I stayed to watch the distribution, and among the other letters put in the rack was this one, which I dexterously contrived to secure without anyone being aware of the fact," and Whispering Ben handed to Wallace the letter which he had stolen from the rack.

The rancher looked amazed and he read the inscription upon the letter aloud:

"GODFREY LOVELANCE,

"Greenville,

"Greer County, Texas."

"That is it, and written too in a pretty fair hand, as hands goes."

The rancher studied the post-mark for a few moments and then shook his head.

"You cannot make it out?"

"No, it is so blurred that I cannot make head nor tail of it."

"That is true enough; my eyes are as sharp as any post-office clerk that ever lived, but I will be hanged if I could discover where it came from,

but open it, and we will speedily find out all about it."

"But don't you think there is some trick about the matter?" Wallace asked.

"A trick?"

"Yes, it is an utter impossibility for any one to know that such a man as Godfrey Lovelance is in Greenville."

"Are you certain that there is not a Godfrey Lovelance here?" Whispering Ben asked. "It is an odd, strange name, I know, but coincidences of the kind are happening every day."

"I know every man in the town, and no man in the district bears the name of Lovelance or any name at all like it!" the rancher declared, positively.

"It certainly is very strange," Whispering Ben admitted. "But open the letter and you will soon have an explanation of the mystery."

"This may be a decoy!" Wallace exclaimed, suspiciously.

"Suppose it is—what difference does it make?" the New Yorker questioned. "I was careful to secure the letter in such a way that no one could detect that I had done the trick. There were a dozen other men in the neighborhood of the rack at the time, so that if the letter is missed—if it is a decoy—it would not be possible for the smartest bloodhound that ever tracked a fugitive to decide who took the letter."

Wallace pondered over the affair for a moment.

"We mustn't make any blunder about this matter," he observed. "If some one has put up a job we want to go to work to beat the game."

"Oh, yes, that goes without saying!" Whispering Ben declared.

"Now then, if this is a decoy letter, the moment it is missed the man who is on the watch will suspect that it has been stolen from the rack, and as only the man to whom it is addressed would have any object in taking it, the truth is immediately made plain to him that Godfrey Lovelance is in Greenville."

"Yes, that is so. Old pal, you show your ancient sagacity by working this thing out."

"That fact is an important one for the bloodhound to know—that is, supposing that there is a bloodhound on the track, and I am very much inclined to suspect that there is one."

"Well, I must agree with you that it really does look that way."

"And being assured that the man he seeks is in the town, he will immediately set to work to find him."

"Yes, yes, undoubtedly."

"Now if Godfrey Lovelance is not in Greenville, and did not steal this letter from the rack, not daring to go up and ask for it openly for fear some foe was on his track, there is only one other explanation of its disappearance."

"Taken by mistake, I suppose?"

"Exactly; by some man who is a bad hand at reading writing, and who mistook the letter for one that he had been expecting."

"And I suppose you know just such a man," Whispering Ben observed, with a knowing air.

"Yes, I think I do. Well, this man took the letter home, and asked a pard to read it for him, and that pard, the moment he looked at the letter, made the discovery that it was not for this man, and told him he must take it back."

"You know the pard also, I suppose," and the New Yorker put his tongue in his cheek in a peculiar way.

"I reckon I can run across him somewhere."

"And the bloodhound, of course, will immediately come to the conclusion that either the man who took the letter, or the pard who was to read it is Godfrey Lovelance, if he doubts the truth of the story."

"Yes, he would be apt to jump to such an opinion, for he will argue that no one but the man of whom he was in search, would trouble the letter."

"Then he proceeds to hunt down the parties, and when the job is accomplished, he will find, to his astonishment and disgust, no doubt, that neither one of the men is at all like the fugitive of whom he is in search."

"Yes, he will be thrown completely off the track, and will be certain to think that the two men were telling the truth when they said the letter was taken by mistake."

"Beautifully planned!" exclaimed Whispering Ben, rubbing his hands in delight. "Ah, my dear old pal, I can plainly see your fine Italian hand in this game."

"I think it will work all right," Wallace remarked in a self-satisfied tone.

"Work! well, I should smile!" the other declared. "There isn't a doubt but what it will work!"

"But we must know what is in the letter?"

"That is easily arranged."

"True! a kettle of boiling water will do the job, and as Comanche keeps bachelor's hall here, I reckon I can get that easily enough."

As it happened, the saloon-keeper was just making himself a cup of coffee, so the rancher had no trouble in getting the water, and by the aid of the steam the letter was soon unsealed.

It was only a brief note, and Wallace ran his eyes over it rapidly, Whispering Ben watching him with a deal of interest.

By the expression upon the face of the rancher, it was plain that he was perplexed.

"Humph!" he exclaimed, "I don't know exactly what to make of this!"

"How so?"

"Well, the letter seems innocent enough. Listen!" And then he read it aloud:

"GAINESVILLE, May 2d.

"MY DEAR GODFREY:—

"I thought I would drop you a few lines to let you know that I am getting along all right. Clerking suits me pretty well, and I think I shall stick to it, although there is not much money in it, still by keeping my expenses down, I will be able to save enough to join you in something when you find a good place to locate. I am getting well up in keeping store, and if you find a town with a boom on, maybe we can make a strike. I send this to Greer-ville, for, according to your programme, you ought to fetch there about this time. Write soon and tell me what the prospect is.

"Ever your loving brother,

"JOHN LOVELANCE."

"It does seem innocent enough," Whispering Ben remarked.

"Yes, it may be genuine, but I doubt it. It is a cunning decoy, and so worded that the true Godfrey Lovelance will not take the alarm upon reading it, but I reckon the scheme will not work this time." And then the rancher sealed the letter up again, performing the task so skillfully that when it was done the letter showed no signs of ever having been opened.

"Now to work the return, and then to discover who the bloodhound is."

"When you will proceed to make it lively for him?" Whispering Ben suggested.

"Yes, it is quite likely," the rancher responded.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE SCENT.

In order to avoid suspicion, and make people believe that his only motive in coming to Greer-ville was to strike some good business opening, the Lone Hand took pains to ascertain the particulars in regard to several chances which the landlord of the hotel recommended, and after the mail had arrived he dropped in Goldsburg's store, ostensibly for the purpose of purchasing some cigars, but in reality to see if the decoy letter had been placed in the rack according to the arrangement.

As he passed by the Jewess he nodded, and at the same time took a look at the rack; perceiving the letter was not there, he came to the conclusion the girl had neglected to place it in the rack, for as the mail had only been in the store some fifteen minutes, he did not think it was possible that the decoy letter had already been claimed.

There were a number of customers in the store, and some of them were talking to Rebecca, so he had no chance to speak to the girl about the matter.

He bought his cigars, chatted for a few minutes with the old Jew until the customers departed, then he advanced to the desk where the girl sat, Goldsburg following.

"I see that you haven't been able to put the letter in the rack yet," the man-hunter remarked.

"Oh, yes, sir, it is there," Rebecca answered, and as she spoke she turned so as to command a view of the rack.

The moment her eyes fell upon it a cry of amazement came from her lips.

"Oh, it is gone!" she exclaimed.

"Ah, you placed it in the rack, then?" the Lone Hand observed, somewhat astonished.

"Yes, sir, I had it under the desk, and when I emptied the letters out of the bag I slipped it in among the rest, and then placed it in the rack."

"Some one has taken it, then?"

"Yes, sir, and without my knowledge, too, for no one asked for it, and I do not understand how any one could get the letter without my knowing it, for I have kept a good watch on the rack about all the time."

"It is very strange," Goldsburg observed, with a wise shake of the head. "You can depend upon mine child, you know, Mr. Hand," he continued. "Rebecca is no foolish girl who does not know what she is saying. Her eyes are sharp—like gimlets, and any one who gets ahead of her must get up early in der morning."

"Well, I reckon this man who got the letter must be an early riser, then, for he succeeded certainly in stealing a march upon your daughter," the Lone Hand observed, with a smile.

"Yes, that is true, but I don't understand it a bit!" the girl declared. "I thought I kept a good watch upon the rack, and I would not have believed that any one could possibly take a letter from it without my seeing them."

"Mine gootness!" what manner of man can this be?" Goldsburg exclaimed.

"I reckon he is a pretty sharp customer," the man-hunter replied. "But what I don't understand is how he happened to get hold of the letter so quickly. The mail has not been in over half an hour."

"Not half an hour yet," the girl remarked, with a glance at the clock. "And there has not been over twenty people in the store during that time."

"Were they all townsmen—people whom you knew?" the Lone Hand asked.

"Yes, only one stranger, a nicely-spoken gentleman who said his name was Benjamin Armstrong."

"A youngish man, not quite so large as I am, with rather light-brown hair?"

"Oh, no, sir! This gentleman was about forty or forty-five, rather short and inclined to be fat and with curious colored streaked hair."

The man-hunter shook his head.

"That isn't the man I am after, but among the townsmen who have been in the store since the mail came in are there any who answer to the description I gave?"

"Yes, sir, three or four, I think," the girl answered, after a pause, occupied in reflecting upon the matter.

"If it is not too much trouble, make me out a list of all the men who have been in the store since the arrival of the mail, so I can take them one by one and see if the party I seek is in the list. No hurry about it, you know. Make it out during any leisure time that you may have."

"I will, sir; I can do it easily enough, for I am sure I can remember every one who was in the store."

"She will do it, mine goot fr'end, be sure of that!" the old Jew exclaimed. "And I hope that you will not forget to keep your eyes open for der robbers that got away mit mine cash."

"Oh, I will attend to that matter; don't you worry about it. I fancy that I have got a sort of a nibble at my hook already, though I have not taken the trouble to put on any bait," the Lone Hand remarked.

"Is that so?" the old Jew inquired, with eager interest.

"Yes, I have noticed that there is a big, ruffianly-looking fellow who has been paying particular attention to my movements, and the thought came to me that, as I am a stranger in the town, it is possible suspicion may have been excited that I am something more than a speculator in search of an opening. You know there is an old saying, 'suspicion ever haunts the guilty mind.'"

"Yesh, yesh, mine gootness, yesh, and how true it ish, too, mine fr'end!" Goldsburg remarked.

At this point the Lone Hand happened to glance through the door and, lounging along on the opposite side of the street, he saw the man of whom he had spoken.

"There is the fellow now," he said. "That big man who is got up like a cowboy," directing the attention of the father and daughter to the fellow. "If you notice, he is just lounging over there, and my idea is that he has been set to play the spy upon me."

"That man is no good!" the old Jew declared with a solemn shake of the head. "I know him well. It is George Hardacre."

"Yes, he is one of the biggest ruffians that can be found in the country!" the girl remarked.

"George Hardacre he is called?" the Lone Hand said.

"That ish his name," Goldsburg replied. "He ish a cowboy and works on the Triangle Ranch, but he does more loafing in town than anything else. It ish a wonder to me that Wallace, der boss of der ranch, keeps him, but that Alex Wallace is a nice fellow—too goot-natured to even make much monish people say, and I s'pose as he ish fond of a spree himself he does not mind if his men go on one once in a while."

"Apart from his drinking what reputation does this cowboy bear?" the man-hunter asked.

"Well, I never heard anything against him," the old Jew replied. "Excepting that when he ish on a spree he is apt to be quarrelsome and has been mixed up in some pretty big rows."

"Do you think he is the kind of a man to take part in a job like the one by which you suffered?"

Goldsburg pondered over the question for a few minutes before he replied, then he shrugged his shoulders and said:

"Mine goot fr'end, I don't know, it ish a hard matter to decide. Mebbe if he was hard pushed he would do a thing of that kind, but I would not like to say right out that I thought so."

The Lone Hand smiled at the caution of the old Jew, but his reluctance to say anything to the discredit of the cowboy annoyed the girl.

"Father is too good-natured!" she declared.

"He always hesitates to say anything bad about anybody, but it is my opinion that George Hardacre would do almost anything for money, particularly if he hadn't any and wanted to go on a spree."

"Well, well, mebbe he would," Goldsburg admitted. "But it ish my rule not to say anything against a man unless I have der proof to back it up."

"That is a good rule," the man-hunter observed.

"Of course I hav'n't any proof," Rebecca remarked. "But I am certain that George Hardacre is a wicked man, and I don't believe he would hesitate to commit any crime if he wanted money, and it could be got in that way."

The Jewish maid spoke quite hotly, and the

Lone Hand watched her expressive face with interest.

He had a high opinion of the instincts of women, and believed that often they jumped to a truer conclusion upon the spur of the moment than men did after deliberate reasoning.

"I reckon I will have to keep my eyes upon this cowboy," the man-hunter remarked.

"Yes, and I feel sure that you will find he is as bad a fellow as you can find in the town," Rebecca asserted. "It is my opinion, too, that his boss, this Alex Wallace, is no better than he ought to be, or else he would not keep such a rascal upon his place."

"Now, now, mine child, I am afraid you are going too far!" the father exclaimed in remonstrance.

"She is arguing on the idea of the old adage, 'Birds of a feather flock together,'" the Lone Hand remarked.

"Ah, yesh, mine gootness! but these ranchers cannot be too particular!" Goldsburg declared. "It is not possible to obtain men mit all der cardinal virtues for twenty or thirty dollars a month."

"That is true enough," the man-hunter observed. "Well, I will be off. Don't forget to make out that list, Miss Rebecca, please, and I will see if I can discover who got away with the letter. The job was certainly worked in an extremely neat manner, and the man who did it is no novice in that business, evidently."

The girl said she would have the list ready in half an hour, and the Lone Hand took his departure; and when he was in the street, instead of returning to the hotel, he strolled off in the opposite direction, his idea being to see if the cowboy would follow him.

His anticipations were realized: the man came slowly along in his rear.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LONE HAND AND THE COWBOY.

A LITTLE way up the street was a saloon which bore the rather high-sounding title of the Wichita White House, and in order to make the place conform to the name the outside of the building had been given a coat of whitewash. It was the only building in the town that could boast of any outward ornamentation, and so stood out distinctly from the others.

When the Lone Hand reached the saloon he concluded to go in and get a glass of ale, not that he craved the refreshment, but he wanted to see what the cowboy would do under the circumstances.

He had an idea that the fellow would follow him into the saloon.

In this anticipation he was not disappointed, for he had hardly got up along side of the bar, and given his order to the affable gentleman who presided behind the counter, when George Hardacre came stalking into the place.

The cowboy called for whisky and nodded in the most familiar manner to the man-hunter as he took a position by his side.

"How are ye, stranger?" he said. "It 'pears to me that this ain't the furst time I hev' run across you."

"I think it is, as far as I know," the man-hunter replied.

"Wal, I am pretty nigh sart'in that it ain't. How might I call yer handle?"

"My name is Hand—L. Hand."

The cowboy shook his head.

"I reckon I never heerd that ar' name afore."

"I told you that I didn't think we had ever run across each other."

"Wal, hyer's luck anyhow!" and the cowboy drained his glass after speaking.

"Same to you," the Lone Hand replied, and then he drank his ale.

A sudden thought seemed to occur to the cowboy, and he surveyed the man-hunter for a moment.

"I tell you w'ot it is, stranger, it is mighty hard work for me to get the idea outen my head that I ain't met you somewhar," he said. "Mebbe you called yerself by some other name then," and he indulged in a knowing grin at this point. "You know, down in a country like this hyar, men don't allers go by the same name."

"That isn't true in my case, for I have never had but the one name."

"Mighty queer that I can't git the idea out of my head that you and me ain't strangers," the cowboy persisted.

"Well, you may have known some man that looked like me," the Lone Hand suggested.

"Yes, that is jist how it may be—some feller w'ot looked like you. I never thought of that!" exclaimed the other.

"It might be that way, you know."

"Right you ar', sure as ye'r born. You are a stranger in these parts, I reckon, for I don't remember to have seen you hyer afore."

"Yes, I only came into the county a few days ago."

"Whar's yer hailing-place?"

"Austin, Texas."

"Oh, yes, I have been down thar, and a right smart chunk of a town Austin is, too. I am from down that way myself."

"Yes, is that so?" the man-hunter remarked, perceiving that the other expected him to say something.

"Yes, sir, you kin bet yer boots on that! I'm from San Antone, I am, but I ain't no Greaser, I want you to know!" the man declared.

"You don't look like one."

"No, sir, you kin bet yer dust on that, too. I come from the genuine old white man stock. No yellow Greaser in mine, thank you, and I am all wool and a yard wide. My name is Hardacre—George Hardacre—and I'm a hard nut to crack when I get started, you had better believe!"

"Well, you are certainly big enough to hold your own," the Lone Hand remarked, surveying the generous proportions of the other.

He was almost as large a man as the noted criminal-catcher, but altogether more loosely built, and a good judge of men, after surveying the two, would quickly have decided that he did not possess either the strength or the activity of the Lone Hand.

"Oh, when I git on the war-path I am a chief, and don't you furgit it!" the cowboy announced. "I say, w'ot is your little game down in these parts—w'ot are you arter?"

"Oh, I am a kind of a speculator, looking around for a chance to make a few ducats."

"Open for anything, I s'pose, w'ot has got money into it?"

"Yes, 'most anything."

The cowboy looked around for a moment, as if to make sure that there wasn't any listeners near, but as the saloon was without customers, excepting the pair whose conversation we are recording, and the bartender was at the other end of the counter, reading a newspaper, it was plain that there was little danger of the conversation being overheard if it was carried on in a moderate tone.

"Say, sport, I reckon I kin put you up to a good thing if you keer to go into it," the cowboy remarked, in a low and guarded tone.

"Well, I reckon I am ready for any chance, if the prospects for ducats are good."

"Oh, they are first-class, and no mistake!" the cowboy asserted.

"What is the speculation?"

"Did you hear 'bout how these ar' Red Wolves of Wichita got away with the old Jew's cash—Goldsburg, you know, w'ot keeps the store?"

"Oh, yes, I heard all about it; but you know there's a good many people who don't take much stock in the yarn; they think it is jest a make-up of the Jew."

"Wal, I have heered that allowed; but I don't take much stock in it; do you?"

The Lone Hand could plainly see that though the question was put in a careless manner, yet the fellow was decidedly interested in learning his opinion on this point.

"Oh, I don't know," the man-hunter replied. "I don't take any interest in the thing, you see, and being a stranger—not knowing the Jew, and so not acquainted with the style of man he is—it would not be possible for me to give an opinion about the matter that would be worth anything."

"But, I say, it don't seem possible to you that a galoot like the Jew would go and make up a yarn like that out of hull cloth, hey?"

"No, it don't!" the man-hunter replied.

"But, as I said before, I don't know anything about the Jew—hav'n't any idea whether he is the kind of man to work a job of that sort or not; but it seems to me that the folks in the town ought to be able to judge, and if they have a notion that the Jew isn't telling the truth, there ought to be something in it."

"Oh, wal, people git prejudiced sometimes, you know!" the cowboy assented. "The old Jew is a pretty tough cuss at a bargain. A man who goes in his store to trade must expect to be skinned, every time, if he don't keep his eyes peeled, and I reckon thar is a kind of a feeling ag'in' the Jew on that account, and that is why people ain't willing to believe his story 'bout how them ar' Red Wolves of Wichita cleaned him out."

"There may be something in that," the Lone Hand remarked.

"You kin jist bet thar is, and a heap of the boys ar' jist ready for to kick themselves because they didn't git a chance to clean the old Jew out themselves!" the cowboy asserted.

"That is possible, I suppose."

"You bet it is! I know a heap of men in the town who would be glad of a chance to hold a mean old skinning galoot like the Jew up, and they wouldn't think it was much out of the way either, for the Jew is a cheating old son-of-a-gun, anyway!"

"Oh, well, it would hardly be square to go for him though."

"Yes, I know that; I wouldn't do sich a thing; but thar's a lot of men in the town who would, but I was jist explaining this thing so you would understand how it is that the most of the boys don't take any stock in the Jew's story 'bout how he was held up."

"I understand."

"Now I believe the old man was telling the truth, right from the word, go!" the cowboy declared. "I feel sart'in that them ar' Red Wolves of Wichita did hold him up, and git away with his two thousand dollars, jist as he says."

"It was a bold game, of course, but many a trick just as bold has been worked all through Texas," the Lone Hand remarked.

"That is as true as preaching. You know all about these ar' Red Wolves of Wichita, I s'pose?"

The question was put in a careless way, but the man's keen eyes were fixed intently upon the face of the Lone Hand as he spoke.

"No, I cannot say that I do," the man-hunter replied in the most innocent manner possible. "I never knew that any such gang existed until I heard the story of how they had held up the Jew."

"Wal, I reckon you ar' a stranger in these parts then!" the cowboy exclaimed.

"Yes, that is what I told you, I will have to own up to being a regular tenderfoot, for this is my first trip to this country."

"You will soon git to know the ropes," the other remarked. "But now 'bout these ar' Red Wolves. They have jist been playing merry blazes up in this hyer section for 'bout six months now, and, 'cording to all accounts, thar is only three in the gang, and I were a-thinking, pardner, that a couple of good men could corral some ducats by jest going for these hyer wolves," and as he gave vent to this opinion the cowboy lowered his voice to a cautious whisper.

"Well, I don't know about that," the Lone Hand replied, affecting to be amazed by the suggestion and shaking his head in a dubious way.

"Why, the old Jew would give a thousand, sure, if we could corral the wolves and git back his money!" the cowboy urged.

"Yes, but suppose the wolves corraled us, where would we be?"

"Oh, wal, have got for to take our chances of course," the other replied. "But I tell yer thar is big money into the thing if we made a success out of it."

"No doubt about that, but, as far as I can see, all the advantages are with the outlaws. Of course, I am not as well posted about them as I might be, but as far as I know, there isn't any certainty that there is only three in the gang; there may be a dozen as far as anybody knows, and then too, any party that went after them would have to go up in the Wichita Mountains, and the chances are big, it seems to me, that the Wolves would make mince-meat out of them, for the gang must know the country like a book and would be able to get a decided advantage even if the party that came after them had twice as many men as the Wolves."

"Pard, the Wichita Mountains are my old hunting-grounds!" the cowboy declared. "I don't believe that thar is a squar' foot of them hills that I hain't tramped over a dozen times."

"You would be a good man for a guide, but you will have to excuse me from taking any of it in mine!" the Lone Hand declared. "I haven't lost any Red Wolves, or any other kind of wolves, and if the old Jew is anxious to get his money, or satisfaction, let him raise a gang, take some man like you for a guide, who is posted, and sail in."

"Would you go along, pard?"

"Nary time!" cried the Lone Hand, decidedly. "I am not anxious to engage in any speculation of that kind. It is entirely out of my line. I am just as hot after money as any man that ever struck this town, but I will be hanged if I am going to risk my scalp to get it!"

"Pardner, I am afeard you hain't got any sand!" the cowboy exclaimed.

"I haven't got the sand to go into a game when the chances are all against me!" the Lone Hand declared.

"No sand now, I reckon," the cowboy observed, in an ugly sort of way. He was evidently annoyed at his failure to get the other to go in with him.

"Just try me, and you will be astonished at the amount of sand I possess!" the other replied, defiantly.

CHAPTER XV. A QUARREL.

THE Lone Hand understood the game as well as though he had planned it.

This ruffianly cowboy, George Hardacre, was either one of the Red Wolves, or else a confederate of the outlaw band.

He had been deputed to keep a watch upon Goldsburg, for the purpose of discovering whether the old Jew intended to take any steps toward pursuing the robbers, and attempting to recover his money.

The fellow had immediately spotted him, a stranger in the town, and had come to the conclusion that he was a suspicious character, and one who needed watching.

The man reasoned that as he—the Lone Hand—was a speculator, on the lookout for a chance to make money, he might be induced, by the hope of getting a large reward of the Jew, to undertake the job of attempting to capture the outlaws, and so the cowboy had devised the cunning scheme of proposing to go after the robbers, in order to find out what the other thought about the matter.

Strange to say though the prompt declining

of the proposal by the stranger was not satisfying. The cowboy had made up his mind that the Lone Hand *did* intend to take an active part in the matter, and his expressed disinclination to have anything to do with the scheme nursed the anger of the cowboy. He believed that the other was afraid to trust him, and then, too, he was annoyed because he had not succeeded in winning the confidence which he had set out to gain, but the prompt manner in which the stranger sent forth a note of defiance rather astonished him.

If he was a tenderfoot, he was evidently on the fight.

On his part, the Lone Hand believed that in all cases of this kind it was best to take the bull by the horns at once.

If there was to be trouble, let it come as promptly as possible."

"Say, I reckon you are inclined to be a little sassy!" the cowboy exclaimed.

"Oh, I don't know about that; one thing is sure, though, I am not the kind of man to stand any nonsense!"

"I reckon you don't know who I am!" cried the cowboy, putting his hands to his sides, and sticking his elbows out, assuming a decidedly warlike look.

"If that is so, and you are anxious about the matter, you had better get somebody to introduce you to me," the Lone Hand rejoined.

"I am a bad man, I am, and when I git going I am the kind of critter w'ot likes to wade in blood!"

These words had not escaped the attention of the barkeeper, and when he saw that there was likely to be trouble, he laid aside his newspaper, and advanced to that part of the bar near which the two were standing.

"Say, gents, I don't want to interfere in your talk, but if you calculate to have a scrap, you will have to go out of hyer," he said, in a courteous way, but with decided firmness.

The saloon man knew the cowboy of old; he saw that Hardacre had made up his mind to force the stranger into a fight, and he was determined that he should not have an opportunity to damage the property of the saloon, as he had done on a previous occasion.

The cowboy was quick to resent the interference.

"Look a-hyer, Tommy Smith, don't you know that it ain't perlite for a third party to interfere when two gents is a-talking?" Hardacre cried.

"I ain't the kind of a galoot to interfere with no man's business!" the owner of the saloon responded. "But I kin jest tell you, George Hardacre, that you ain't a-going to git inter no fight in this hyer saloon, and smash things generally to blazes as you and some of yer pards did once on a time! I mean business now! You hear me? It is my house that is a blooming! You may be a bad man, but I am a worse if you git me started! You have got all outdoors to fight in, and thar's no need of your smashing things to thunder in hyer. I mean what I say, I tell you now, and hyer's the argument to back me up!" and as he finished the speech the saloon-keeper drew a cocked six-shooter from under the counter where it had lain on a shelf all in readiness for just such an emergency.

"Oh, wal, if you feel that way about it, I reckon we will have to go out into the street," the cowboy remarked with a polite nod.

"Yes, I reckon you better had," Smith replied. "No offense intended, you know, always glad to see you when you want to take a drink, and ain't on the fight."

"All right, I'll see you later!" and then the cowboy turned to the Lone Hand. "Now, Mister Man, if you will have the politeness to foller me to the street I will try to hammer a little sense into you."

"Maybe you can perform the operation, but it is my opinion that you have bitten off more than you can chew," the Lone Hand remarked.

"We will soon see about that!" the cowboy declared. "If I can't git away with you with one hand tied behind my back I don't want a cent!" and with this declaration the cowboy marched out of the door.

The Lone Hand followed him, and the genial Tommy Smith hastened from behind the bar and took up a position in the doorway so as to be able to see the fun.

"Thar ain't anybody 'round so I can get a bet on," the saloon-keeper murmured, "but if thar was, I would be willing to give big odds that this stranger lays the cowboy out, and will not be put to his trumps to do it either!"

Smith was an old pugilist who had fought some good battles in his time, and he knew a good man when he saw one.

"Now then I reckon to give you a hiding which will last you one while!" the cowboy declared, after he had got into the street, turning and facing the stranger as he spoke.

"If you have made a mistake about this matter and get the hiding yourself, perhaps you will be more cautious in picking up a stranger the next time," the other remarked.

"If you kin fight one-half as well as you kin talk, you must be a hummer!" Hardacre exclaimed, sarcastically.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating; try

"it on, and you will soon find out!" the Lone Hand rejoined.

"Ar' you ready? If you ar' say so, for the avalanche is coming!"

"Let her come!" responded the other, throwing himself into a fighting position which would have delighted the heart of a boxing-master.

"Oho!" cried the cowboy as he flourished his long arms in the air, "I reckon you are one of the chaps wot has been taking boxing-lessons! I have seen plenty of such roosters afore, and although sich tricks may be all right, when you have got big pudding-bags on yer fists, yet they don't amount to nothing in a real, squar' fight; it is the strength that tells the story then."

"Pitch in and you will soon find out whether your belief is correct or not," replied the man-hunter.

"I'm a-coming!" and, with the word, the cowboy made a desperate rush at his antagonist.

His only idea in fighting was to throw himself upon his opponent with all the force and fury possible.

A half-a-dozen vigorous blows he delivered at the Lone Hand who found no difficulty in either parrying, or dodging the clumsily aimed strokes.

"Oh, you are mighty spry on yer feet!" the cowboy exclaimed, as he paused for a moment to take breath. "But if I once git one good squar' lick at you I will soon put a stop to that!"

"You long-legged jackass!" cried the Lone Hand in supreme contempt. "You don't know enough about boxing to hit the side of a house!"

This frank expression of his opponent's opinion irritated the cowboy greatly, just as the man-hunter intended, for it was his game to get the other angry and excited.

"Durn yer! I'll smash you now!" he cried, and Hardacre made another rush at his nimble foe, even fiercer than the first.

This time the Lone Hand only retreated a step or two, and then he nimbly dodged under the arm of the other, and as the cowboy turned clumsily to pursue him, the man-hunter let go with his right, catching the cowboy just under the ear.

Up went Hardacre's hands and down he went like a log.

A shout of astonishment arose on the air from the throats of the little crowd which had quickly gathered around the combatants.

Never had any of them seen a blow so deftly given.

The cowboy lay motionless for a moment, and the saloonkeeper, Smith, in the doorway, carried away by the excitement, got out his watch, thus assuming the office of time-keeper.

"He has got three minutes, gents, by London prize-ring rules!" he shouted. "And if he don't come to time in three minutes, it is a knock-out! Why don't a couple of you pick him up—that is all right and allowable by the rules—act as his seconds, while I keep the time?"

As there happened to be a couple of cowboys in the circle who were acquainted with Hardacre, they hurried to his assistance.

The cowboy had been dazed for the moment by the blow, but by the time he was got on his feet by the others he was all right, although he had a queer feeling in his head and was considerably exhausted by the prodigious exertion which he had made, so the call of time at the end of the three minutes came entirely too quickly to suit him.

He advanced, though, to meet his opponent, but the expression upon his face had entirely altered.

The brief exchange of blows had shown him that he was no match for his opponent, and if he had not been dogged and stubborn in the extreme he would have withdrawn from the contest; but he tried to persuade himself that it was just a chance, accidental blow which had sent him to "grass" in such a speedy manner, and his antagonist would not be able to repeat it.

This opinion was destined to be woefully overthrown, and quickly, too, for no sooner had he faced the Lone Hand than that powerful and experienced boxer, "fainted" with his left at the head and then sent in a body blow with his right which seemed to fairly make the cowboy's ribs crack.

He followed this up with a terrific left-hander planted full between the eyes, which floored Hardacre as though he had been shot.

Another yell went up from the crowd, by this time increased to twice the size it had been at first.

The seconds ran and assisted the cowboy to his feet, but Hardacre had had all the fight he wanted.

"I've got enuff," he said, "but I will git squar' with you for this some day!" and then he slouched away.

In the fullness of his heart, Smith invited everybody in to have a drink at his expense, an invitation gladly accepted.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WARNING.

OF course the Lone Hand had to go in with the rest; the citizens would not have been satisfied if he had not done so, and many were the congratulations he received on account of his easy victory over the cowboy.

The genial Tommy Smith was particularly enthusiastic.

"I tell you what it is, pard, you did the job up brown, and no mistake!" he declared. "I am an old pug, I am, and I have seen some good fights in my time, but I never saw anything that went ahead of this scrap."

A dozen voices declared this to be a fact.

"And I just want to tell you, stranger, that you did a real service to the town by knocking out this cowboy galoot!" the saloon-keeper continued. "He was an ugly customer, and no mistake."

"That's so, that's so!" chimed in a half-a-dozen voices.

"I always hate to see the fellow come into my place for fear he will get into some trouble before he goes out," the saloon-keeper continued. "He is one of the old style cowboys who, when they have a little money in their pockets, think they can run the town; their idea is to come in, spend their ducats and paint the town red."

"That is a fact!" cried one of the bystanders, an old gray-headed settler. "I have seen this same George Hardacre, with a half-a-dozen pards, come inter Greenville hyer and jist make the town howl."

"Yes, that is the kind of man he is," the saloon-keeper affirmed. "And I tell you, stranger, you have done Greenville a service in cutting this rooster's comb. I reckon we will not be troubled with his cavortings 'round town for some time to come."

"Well, gentlemen, I really had no wish to quarrel with the man, but the trouble was forced upon me," the Lone Hand remarked. "He insisted upon a fight, and I was obliged to accommodate him."

"And you did it, too—did it right up to the handle!" Tommy Smith exclaimed, enthusiastically. "And if he had not been satisfied it would have shown that he was the biggest kind of a hog."

"Gentlemen, I will have to ask you to excuse me now," the Lone Hand observed. "I have a little business to which I must attend."

"Stranger, can I have about five minutes talk with you in private?" the saloon-keeper asked, abruptly. "An idee has jist come to me that I would like to talk to you about."

"Certainly, I can give you five minutes, easily enough."

The saloon-keeper led the way to his private apartment in the rear of the bar-room, waved the man-hunter to a chair, and took one himself.

He had taken the precaution to close the door carefully after his visitor entered, so that they could converse without danger of being overheard, as he explained.

"Oh, I hardly think that anybody would take the trouble to play the spy upon us," the Lone Hand observed.

"Well, thar's no telling," Tommy Smith observed, with the air of a sage. "Things are dreadfully mixed in this town jist about now, and thar is no telling what anybody may be up to. Stranger, as I was a-telling you, I am a pretty old stager, and I have seen a deal of life in my time; I have run a saloon for nigh onto thirty years, and as I have always kept my eyes open, I reckon I have seen as much as any man of my years who kin be scared up in this town, or any other town, for that matter, bar none!"

"That I can readily believe."

"It is a fact, sure as you're born!" the saloon-keeper declared. "Now I have jist been meditating 'bout this hyer scrape of yourn, and the more I think on it, the bigger the puzzle seems to get."

"The puzzle?"

"Yes; why did that cowboy go in to pick a quarrel with you?"

"Simply because he felt ugly—was spoiling for a fight, I suppose, and as there wasn't any one else handy he pitched upon me. That is the character of the man, I believe?"

"Yes, when he is in licker, but he hadn't been drinking anything to-day, he was as sober as a judge."

"Ah, was that so?"

"Oh, yes, and like the most of the cowboys he don't go in to clinch folks until he has a good cargo of rum on board."

"Well, all I have to say is that he was quick enough to pick a quarrel with me to-day."

"Yes, and that is just what is a-bothering me!" the saloon-keeper declared. "He had some motive besides pure devilry, I am sure."

"Yes, it would seem so."

"And that is the reason why I wanted to have a talk with you. Jist now in the saloon an idee came into my head—I was a-looking at you, you know, and kinder taking your measure, and this 'ere idee came to me, and I am willing to bet 'bout all the money that I can raise too that I ain't far out of the way."

"Well, of course, until I hear what your idee is it will not be possible for me to pass any opinion on the subject," the Lone Hand remarked in his calm, quiet way, his impassible face affording no indication to the thoughts which were passing in his mind.

"As I said afore, I am an old rounder and the better part of my life has been spent in big cities, where I have had an opportunity to be-

come intimately acquainted with the men who do the detective act, the thief-takers, the fellows who spend their lives in hunting down criminals, and it is an idee of mine that these man-hunters, in time, come to have a kind of family resemblance, no matter how unlike in personal appearance they may be to each other."

"That is something new," the other observed, with a quiet smile. "I don't think I ever heard of that theory before."

"Mebbe it is original with me; it is something that I never talk about, although I have had the idee for some time. Well, stranger, it strikes me that you are one of these man-hunters; I think I see the family resemblance, and if you are, it explains why George Hardacre pitched into you so savagely."

"I don't exactly see that."

"Why, it is my belief that this hyer cowboy is crooked, or, if not crooked himself, he is the friend of men who are rascals. The gang suspicioned in some way that your presence in Greenville would be apt to make the town unhealthy for them, and so George went in to clean you out."

"Your idee seems to me to be a reasonable one," the Lone Hand remarked. "I suppose the gang to whom you refer is this party who call themselves the Red Wolves of Wichita?"

"Yes, those are the fellows I mean."

"And do you think that this cowboy is a member of the gang?"

"Well, he ain't any too good to be!" the saloon-keeper asserted.

"I see you are going on general principles."

"That is 'bout the idee. Of course, I ain't got any real knowledge on the subject, but arter George forced you into a fight, I got to thinking why he was so anxious to quarrel with you; and then, when the idee that you were a man-hunter, come up here on the quiet, arter yer game, came to me, the explanation flashed into my mind. The gang have tumbled to you—or suspected you, anyway, and George has been selected to lay you out. By the way, what was he saying when you had the little confab down at the end of the counter jist before the fight?"

"He was proposing what he called a good speculation to me."

"Sho! I never knew him to go into anything."

"He suggested that if we went to work the right way, we might clean out these Red Wolves, and make a big stake by so doing."

"Don't you see what his game was?" cried Tommy Smith, bringing his hand down on his knee with an emphatic slap. "He wanted to see if you had come hyer with the idee of breaking up the gang! He was fool enough to think if that war the little trick you had come to work, you would not see his game, and would give the snap away."

"I reckon you are right about that."

"Certain. You would be safe in betting high on it, and when he found he could not pump you, then he got ugly, and started in to clean you out."

"It does look as if he was connected with the gang," the Lone Hand observed, slowly.

"Oh, yes, I have had a suspicion for some time that Hardacre was mixed up with some kind of crooked work, for he has been spending money pretty freely for the last six months, and as he ain't anything but a common cowboy, it has kinder puzzled me as to how he got his money. I jist let fall a careless remark one time that he was pretty flush, and he accounted for his wealth by saying he was a great poker-player, but I know better than that, for he is no gambler, and seldom comes out ahead."

"Men like this cowboy usually have a pard or two," the Lone Hand observed, reflectively.

"This fellow has one chum, Reddy Gallagher, an Irishman, and the two usually travel together; and now I warn you to look out for yourself, for the first thing you know these two cowboys will come a-gunning for you, and if they can succeed in getting the drop on you, a man of about your size will be their meat, sure."

"I will be on the watch, you can depend upon that. This Hardacre is working somewhere?"

"Yes, on the Triangle Ranch, both he and his pard, Gallagher," the saloon-keeper replied. "The Triangle Ranch is about ten miles up the river; it is run by Alex Wallace."

"I think I have heard his name mentioned," the Lone Hand remarked carelessly. "What sort of a man is this Alex Wallace?"

"Well, he is a pretty good sort of fellow. I can't say that I know anything particularly hard about him. He used to be rather wild—drank and gambled a good deal more than was healthy for his pocketbook, but for a few months now I understand he has turned over a new leaf and is keeping straight."

"Is there a possibility that he is mixed up with this outlaw gang?"

"No, I think not."

"Yet these two bad eggs are employed by him?"

"Yes, but he is easy with his men, and as they keep straight when at the ranch, he has no suspicions that they are not all right."

"Well, I am much obliged for your warning, and I trust you will not say anything about the matter."

"Oh, you can depend upon me!" Tommy Smith cried. "I will keep on the lookout, too, and if I hear anything of importance I will let you know."

"All right; I will be much obliged."

And this terminated the interview. The Lone Hand returned to the hotel, where he found the old Jew, who made a sign signifying that he desired to speak to him in private.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE JEW'S TALE.

THE Lone Hand did not like this proceeding on the part of the old Jew, and made up his mind to speak to him about it.

The man-hunter cast a quick glance around; there were only a couple of customers in the saloon, and they were busily engaged in conversation with the hotel-keeper, so the Lone Hand made a sign to the Jew to follow him, then proceeded to his apartment.

When they were in the room, seated, and with the door closed, the Lone Hand began the conversation.

"Speak low and cautiously, Mr. Goldsburg," he said, "for there is great danger of our conversation being overheard if there is any one playing the spy upon us."

"Yesh, yesh, I will be careful."

"And now, right at the beginning, Mr. Goldsburg, let me tell you that this movement on your part is an extremely imprudent one."

"Mine gootness! you don't tell me so!" the old Jew exclaimed, very much astonished.

"Yes, indeed, it is! I feel pretty certain that a watch has been placed upon me, and your seeking me here in the hotel will at once indicate to the men who are on the watch that there is an understanding between us."

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish so. Mine gootness! I did not t'ink of dot!" Goldsburg remarked, with a doleful shake of the head.

"It is my game to always keep in the background if I possibly can," the Lone Hand explained. "If the men whom I am after get the idea that I am on their track it makes the job of tracking them just twice as hard."

"Oh, yesh, I can understand dot. Well, you must excuse me, mine goot friend; you must remember dot I do not understand business of this kind. I have something to say to you dot vos of importance, and it was my idea that you ought to know about it as quickly as possible."

"Of course, I comprehend that you were anxious, and I ought to have been more particular in cautioning you about the matter."

"It ish about your letter business," the old man explained.

"The letter, eh?"

"Yesh, it has come back," and as he spoke the Jew drew the letter from his pocket and gave it to the man-hunter.

"It has not been opened," the Lone Hand observed.

"No, it was taken by mistake."

"By mistake?"

"Yesh, sir."

"How was that?"

"A man named George Lawrence took it from the rack thinking that it was for him."

"George Lawrence, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, George Lawrence badly written, might look something like Godfrey Lovelance, but in this case the writing is almost as plain as print."

"Ah, yesh, but the man ish ignorant—he ish no scholar, and it ish as much as he can do to read writing at all."

"Well, it is possible that such a man might make a mistake of that kind," the Lone Hand remarked, but there was a decided note of unbelief in his voice.

"Oh, yesh, a great many of these mans in der town cannot read writing very well," the Jew observed.

"This George Lawrence took the letter by mistake from the rack thinking it was for him?"

"No, no, it was not George Lawrence himself who took the letter."

"Ah, who then?"

"A friend of this George Lawrence who was in der store. It was der friend dot I meant when I said George Lawrence could not read writing very goot."

"Yes, I understand now; it was not George Lawrence who took the letter but a friend, who saw it in the rack, and being a poor hand at reading writing made the mistake of thinking the letter was for his friend."

"Yesh, dot was so."

"But when Mr. Lawrence got the letter he saw at once that it was not for him and brought it back unopened."

"No, no, mine fr'end, dot was not der way of it!" the old Jew hastened to declare.

"How then?"

"This man who got der letter—"

"Who was the man by the way—what's his name?"

"I do not know."

"Don't know! a stranger then?"

"Let me tell der story and then you will un-

derstand. This man took der letter from der rack, then as he was riding der town out he took some more looks at der letter, and the more he looks at der letter, der more he begun to think that maybe it was not for his friends after all. Outside der town he meets another man coming in, and to this man he shows der letter, and this man, right away quick, tells him that der letter is not for Mister Lawrence and says he will bring it back to me."

"Ah, yes, I see. Do you know this Lawrence?"

"Oh, no, he ish one of der up-river cowboys."

"On whose ranch?"

The old man shook his head.

"You don't know?"

"Mine gootness, mine fr'end! I do not know all der cowboys in der country, and then they are always coming and going like der wind."

"Ah, yes, I see; you don't know Lawrence—you don't know the party who got the letter, but you do know the man who brought the letter back?"

"No, mine fr'end, I do not; he was a stranger, too."

The Lone Hand laughed.

The old Jew looked at him in astonishment.

"Why do you laugh, mine goot fr'end?"

"I laugh at the cleverness of this game."

"Game!" cried Goldsburg, amazed.

"Yes; can you not see that an extremely smart game has been played?"

"Upon my word, I cannot."

"The bait that I set forth—the letter—was taken immediately, opened and read, but the contents are of such a nature that the man who read the letter gained no information, but he was wise enough to suspect that the letter was a trap, and after he made himself master of the contents, he determined to return it, and he contrived the matter in such a way that it is impossible to discover who had the letter."

"Yesh, yesh, but mine goot fr'end, you can see for yourself dot der letter has not been opened!" the Jew exclaimed, utterly bewildered by this unexpected statement.

"Oh, yes, it has!" the Lone Hand declared in his positive way. "I feel as certain of it as if I had stood by the man and witnessed the operation. Don't you know that with a common envelope of this kind it is an easy matter to unseal a letter and then seal it up again so that it will not show that it has been opened?"

"Yesh, yesh, I have heard of such t'ings."

"That is the way the game has been worked; but in spite of the shrewdness which has been displayed in this affair, I have made one point."

"Mine gootness! I suppose I am blind but I cannot see that you have."

"Oh, yes! I used the letter to ascertain if the man I wanted was in this town; the prompt manner in which my bait was taken assures me that he is, and now that I have that knowledge to build upon, I will go to work to find him."

"Oh, mine gootness! this is an awful game!" the old Jew declared.

"And while I am upon my own quest, I shall not neglect to attend to your business," was the comforting assurance that the Lone Hand gave.

"And what will I do mit this letter?"

"Put it in the rack again, just as if you expected that some one will call for it."

"Yesh, I will do dot."

"And mind, don't come to see me any more: that is if you want me to do anything for you."

"Oh, mine dear friend, I depend upon you!" the old man declared.

"If you should make any important discovery, which is extremely unlikely, and the matter requires my instant attention, then you may come, but as I will drop into your store twice a day for my cigars you will have ample opportunity to speak to me."

"Yesh, dot ish true, I will be careful and remember."

Then Goldsburg took his departure.

The Lone Hand allowed him to go out alone, but followed in a few moments, and as the old Jew left the saloon, the man-hunter sat down in a corner and took up a newspaper.

Apparently he did not pay any attention to the men who were in the room, but few things escaped his keen eyes, and the moment he entered the apartment he noticed that there was a man there who was not in the saloon when he and the Jew quitted it.

The fellow was dressed like a cowboy, and was muscular, ruffianly-looking, and red-headed; from his face a judge of nationalities would have immediately set him down for an Irishman.

When the Lone Hand entered the room, the fellow looked at him in a peculiar way, and the Lone Hand noticed that all conversation suddenly stopped, and the landlord, as well as the customers at the bar, looked embarrassed and ill at ease, just as though they did not feel comfortable.

A couple of minutes after the Jew departed the cowboy also took himself off, and the man-hunter fancied that all the rest in the room drew a long breath, as though the presence of the man had been irksome to them.

The landlord came from behind the bar and approached the Lone Hand.

"Did you notice that fellow who just went out?" the host asked.

"The cowboy?"

"Yes."

"Well, I did not take any particular notice of him," the Lone Hand answered, carelessly.

"Don't you know who he is?"

"Of course not; how could I know? I am a stranger in the town."

"That was Reddy Gallagher."

"Reddy Gallagher?"

"Yes, the side-pard of George Hardacre, the cuss that you hammered so badly a while ago."

"Ah, you ought to have introduced me," the Lone Hand remarked, in a languid way.

"Gosh! when you came in I reckoned he would introduce himself to you with a gun!" the landlord exclaimed.

"Probably he wasn't ready to let her go, Gallagher," the man-hunter observed, smiling.

"You want to keep your eyes open; he will be sure to go gunning for you 'fore long," the other continued.

"Well, if he is anxious for a free ride in the first carriage of the procession he had better try it on. I'm his mutton whenever he is ready!"

"I reckon you will be able to hold your own, although Reddy is counted to be one of the bad men of the town," the landlord remarked, and then he rejoined the others, who had listened, open-mouthed, to the conversation.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HANDS UP.

THE owner of the Triangle Ranch had always been a popular man in Greenville, although he traveled at so fast a gait, to quote the common expression, that the sober-minded citizens shook their heads and gravely prophesied that it would not be long before the Triangle man reached the end of his rope.

These remarks came to the ears of Wallace, of course. Human nature was about the same in the obscure Texan village as elsewhere. There were plenty of good-natured "friends" who considered it their duty to tell the rancher of all the ill-natured remarks about him that came to their knowledge.

The observations did not seem to worry Wallace at all though, for he only laughed at the words of the prophets.

"They need not trouble their heads about me!" he declared. "I am able to take care of myself, and I reckon that I make more money in a year than these men, who affect to believe that I am going to the dogs. I am fond of a good time, and I will not deny it, but I attend to my business, right up to the handle all the same, and I do not trouble my head about my neighbors, either, for I have known many a man to get rich just by minding his own business."

The critics shook their heads at this confident assertion, but they did not attempt to deny that the Triangle rancher certainly seemed to be getting along pretty well.

A year or so before he had been extremely short of money and it was well-known that he had hard work to satisfy his creditors, but matters had evidently improved with him, for now he was not only out of debt but seemed to have plenty of money.

The wisecracks of Greenville, and its neighborhood, puzzled their brains a great deal to account for Wallace's prosperity, and finally they came to the conclusion that to his skill as a card-player he was indebted for a good bit of his money.

He was known to be very fond of gambling and was reported to be extremely successful, although this was denied by the men with whom he played, but the denial was not believed by the busybodies, and so the rancher's prosperity was accounted for.

It was true that Alex Wallace took part in a little poker game two or three nights a week in a private room in the rear of Tommy Smith's Wichita White House Saloon, but as a rule the play was not heavy, and at the end of the "sessions" few of the players could boast of being heavy winners and the losers had not parted with dollars enough to seriously embarrass them.

On this night of which we write the poker party had assembled in the private room. There were three townsmen: Dave Smith, the stockman, Lige Maxwell of the Double-cross Ranch and Alex Wallace.

As it happened on this occasion Dave Smith and Lige Maxwell were particularly flush.

The stockman, by a skillful deal had cleared a couple of thousand dollars, which was double what he expected, and, as he boasted, it was just like picking up money in the street.

The Double-cross rancher had sold a big bunch of cattle and so he felt in good spirits as he had got a better price than he expected.

Both of the pair had been drinking freely, not enough to intoxicate them, but sufficient to make them feel extremely lively, and both were disposed to play a pretty heavy game, and as luck favored them the result of this was that by eleven o'clock the three townsmen were cleaned out, and they retired from the game.

Alex Wallace had held his own pretty well; but after the citizens left, Big Dave Smith con-

sulted his watch, and gravely announced that in about two hours he "reckoned" the Triangle man would have all the poker he wanted.

"Don't you be too sure of that!" Alex Wallace retorted. "I have not been playing in the best of luck so far, that is very true, but I might have done a great deal worse. There is an old saying, too, which perhaps you have heard, to the effect that it is a long lane which has no turning."

"Oh, yes; but you do not stand any chance to-night!" Lige Maxwell declared. "Both Smith and myself are playing in big luck, and we are sure to skin you clean to the bone if you only keep on playing long enough."

"I am not so certain in regard to that as you appear to be," the rancher replied. "But one thing is sure, and that is you will not get the money until you win it. It will take more than words to get it out of my pocket."

This declaration made the others laugh loud and long, but, strange to say, when the game was renewed, the luck which had attended the stockman and the Double-cross rancher seemed to desert them, and Wallace won steadily.

It was his turn now to laugh, and he did not fail to jeer his antagonists.

"You see, gentlemen, the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," he remarked. "Does it not strike you now that you were a little too previous in your remarks?"

"Oh, this will not last!" Big Dave Smith declared. "We will skin you as clean as a whistle before we get through."

"You can bet on that!" Lige Maxwell added. "We are only giving you a little breathing-time—a sort of respite, as it were."

"Yes, we don't want to clean you out too quickly, for that would end the fun!" the stockman said with a grin.

"I am very much obliged to you for your consideration," Wallace replied. "And, on account of your kindness you ought not to have to regret it, but I am afraid that you will before you get through."

The words were prophetic for the Triangle man won steadily.

The others, irritated at the change of fortune, played recklessly, and took risks which good card-sharps would have avoided, and the result of this was that their losses increased and by the time the hands of the clock pointed to one, both the stockman and the Double-cross rancher were completely cleaned out.

Tommy Smith had been an interested looker-on for a couple of hours, for there had been no customers in the saloon during that time, and though he wanted to get to bed, yet under the circumstances he did not feel like intimating to the players that it was time they departed.

When the losers announced, though, that they were cleaned out and could play no more, he expressed his satisfaction.

"Well, gentlemen, I didn't want to hurry you, but it is really time that we were all abed," he remarked.

"Say! why on earth didn't you turn us out an hour ago?" Big Dave Smith remarked, making a wry face. "Both Maxwell and myself would have had a heap more money."

"That is as true as preaching!" the Double-cross rancher assented.

"Well, gentlemen, you would have it, you know," Wallace remarked, stowing away his gains in his pockets. "You see, the trouble is that you were both too avaricious. If you had been content with moderate gains and had quit at twelve o'clock you would have got away with considerable wealth, but you were not satisfied. You were determined upon skinning me clean to the bone, and the result is that you have come out of the little end of the horn; it is a great moral lesson, if you only look at it in the right way."

"Mebbe it is, but I will be durned if I appreciate it!" Smith declared.

"No, when things of that kind are brought home to a man he seldom looks at them in the same light as when he is fitting the application to somebody else," Lige Maxwell remarked, with the air of a philosopher.

"That is so," the saloon-keeper considered. "It's awful easy to preach to another man how he ought to run things, but when we come to play the game ourselves, we don't always practice what we preach."

"No, sir, not by a jugful!" Wallace declared. "Well, let's have a quiet drink all 'round, and then git," Lige Maxwell suggested.

"I reckon that Wallace ought to stand treat this time," Big Dave Smith remarked. "Seeing that he has succeeded in corraling about all the money that there is in the gang it isn't any more than right."

"Oh, I will set up the liquor—I think I can afford too under the circumstances," Wallace replied.

"Say, ain't you kinder afeard to go home with all them ducats in your pockets?" the stockman asked.

"Why should I be afraid?" Wallace asked in surprise.

"Jest think what a prize you would be to them durned cusses who call themselves the Red Wolves of Wichita," Big Dave Smith replied. "If them galoots only knew that you

were going to ride home this night with a couple of thousand dollars in your pocket you can jest bet your bottom dollar that they would be arter you and you would never make the Triangle Ranch with the rocks in your pocket."

"I do not doubt that that is true enough," Wallace remarked. "But where I have got the deadwood on the gang is that the fact I have the money cannot possibly be known to them."

"That is so," the saloon-keeper observed.

"Wal, I dunno," the stockman said, with a shake of the head which was intended to express considerable doubt. "I reckon that gang have their spies out and some one of 'em mought have been in this very saloon to-night, and so got onto the fact that we were playing a big game, then the cuss would pass the word to the rest and the skunks will lay for you."

At this point there was a general expression of unbelief.

"Oh, come down!" the Triangle rancher exclaimed. "You are putting it on entirely too thick!"

"Pretty thick!" Lige Maxwell assented.

"Wal, I dunno," the stockman replied. "Stranger things than that have happened, and that is no mistake 'bout these hyer Red Wolves being mighty cunning chaps."

"Oh, yes, and they would have to have a most excellent spy system to find out about my winnings to-night, so I reckon there is not much danger of my being troubled on my homeward ride, besides, Lige here, goes along with me for a couple of miles, and it will take a pretty good gang to get away with two such men as Maxwell and myself."

"You bet!" the Double-cross rancher exclaimed, decidedly.

"Ah, Dave is jest trying to frighten you!" Tommy Smith declared. "He knows that there is not any more danger of your being troubled than if you were going to bunk down here for the night."

"It will not work, Dave, we cannot be scared!" Wallace declared.

Then the two took a night-cap, as the saloon-keeper termed it, and departed.

It was a pleasant night, the moon afforded ample light and the cool air felt refreshing to the ranchers as they rode on their homeward way.

"Dave Smith was trying to get quite a rig on me with his road-agent nonsense," Alex Wallace remarked.

"Yes, I reckon he was trying to scare you a little," the Double-cross man coincided.

"No doubt of it, but he couldn't work the trick!" Wallace declared. "Why, to hear him talk one would think that I was not able to take care of myself, but I reckon I am not quite so badly off as all that. I have been drinking a little, but my head is all right. Of course, now that I am out in the fresh air, I can feel that I have got about all the liquor on board that I can conveniently carry, but I am not much the worse for it."

"Oh, no, decidedly not!" Lige Maxwell declared. "I have put considerable whisky under my jacket, too, but I know what I am about, just as well as though I hadn't drank anything. But Dave was right about one thing."

"What is that?"

"Why, that these Red Wolves would surely go for you if they had any idea you were carrying such a sum of money with you as you now possess."

"Oh, yes; I am not disputing that at all. There is no doubt about it, but here is where the balance-wheel drops out—how are the fellows to learn the fact? Dave Smith may talk about their having spies around, and all that nonsense, but I don't take any stock in it at all. We were playing in the private room of the saloon to-night; how could any one know that we were playing for big money, or that I had quit a heavy winner?"

"That is so."

"The thing is all bosh, I tell you! There is not the least danger."

Hardly had the words escaped his lips when from behind a house glided three dark forms; the moonbeams glistened on the barrels of their leveled revolvers, and a well-known warning rang out on the air:

"Hands up!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A FINANCIAL TRANSACTION.

THE ranchers were just outside of the town, and the new-comers had been hiding behind a deserted, tumble-down house.

The pair were taken completely by surprise, so sudden and unexpected was the appearance of the Red Wolves, for that the men who uttered the stern command belonged to the noted outlaw band was apparent to the ranchers the moment they got a view of them.

The red masks and gloves betrayed that they were the noted Wichita Mountain outlaws.

The ranchers were in a trap; both were well-armed, but their revolvers were in their belts, and they understood well enough that any attempt to draw them would only result in death.

Involuntarily, almost, they had checked their horses when the outlaws sprung into the road, and, with a blank expression upon their coun-

tenances, they stared into the muzzles of the threatening revolvers.

"Gen'lemen, my name is Gospel Dan! I'm the boss of the Red Wolves of Wichita, and we are the toll-collectors on this hyar road!" the foremost outlaw announced in a hoarse voice, evidently assumed to disguise his natural tones.

"So, gents, if you will have the kindness to shell out yer valuables as soon as you kin I will be much obliged to you."

Wallace cast a quick glance around, as though he meditated making a dash to escape from the trap into which he had fallen, but the eyes of the outlaw chief were on him and he immediately comprehended the idea that was in the rancher's mind.

"I would not try any game of that kind if I were you," he remarked. "That is, not unless you are anxious to be put in a condition for planting. I have got the deadliest kind of a bead drawn on you, and if you take the trouble to ax the fellers who are well acquainted with me, they will tell you that Gospel Dan is a man who always wings his bird, every time! If you are wise you will not try any funny business. Better hand over yer ducats like a gentleman. You ought not to grumble, anyway, seeing as how you came by 'em easy enuff, hey, Maxwell, ain't that so?"

"Well, really, I ain't posted well enough to answer," the Double-cross man replied, astonished at the information of the outlaw.

"Oh, don't try to pull the wool over my eyes!" the road-agent chief cried. "I am well posted if you ain't, and you can bet high on it—just about as well posted as though I had been sitting at the table, flipping the paste-boards with you pilgrims. Mebbe you didn't know that I was peeking in at the window, watching the game."

"No, I certainly was not aware of the fact," Wallace replied.

"It is so, and it kinder made me grin when I saw you hauling in the ducats so fast, 'cos I knew I would skin 'em away from you 'fore you got well out of the town," and the outlaw indulged in a hoarse chuckle.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he laughed, "you were jest a-gathering 'em in for me, and I knew it, all the time!"

"I suppose it is a mighty fine joke, but I will be hanged if I appreciate it!" Wallace exclaimed in a rage.

"Oh, come now, take it easy!" the outlaw advised. "I have got you dead to rights, and it ain't no use for you to kick, for it won't do you the least bit of good. I allers make a pint of doing business in a squar" and gen'lemanly fashion, but I kin be as ugly as any man that you kin scare up in this hyer State of Texas if I take the notion into my head. It would be an easy thing for me to lay you out, and then take your wealth, but I rather not do it; I ain't hankering to kill any man, but business is business, you know."

"Oh, they have got you foul, Wallace, and it is of no use for you to kick!" Lige Maxwell exclaimed, with a laugh. "Take things easy, as I do. These gentlemen are welcome to all the wealth that they can find on me."

"It is all very well for you to talk, Maxwell, but I reckon what you contribute to these toll-gatherers will neither make them nor break you," the Triangle man declared.

"Sho! is it as bad as that?" the road-agent exclaimed. "You don't mean to say that you have skinned him clean? Wal, wal, come to think on it, though, it don't make no difference to us, 'cos we will git the plunder anyway."

"There's good sound reasoning for you," Maxwell exclaimed. "Come, Wallace, shell out! Don't keep the gentlemen waiting."

"Oh, it is all right for you to joke about the matter," the Triangle ranger growled. "But it is no joke to me, I can tell you!"

"You ought not to cut up rusty about it," the road-agent chief observed. "You got the ducats easy enuff, and that's an old saying, you know, easy got, easy gone!"

"Well, under the circumstances, I suppose the quicker I comply with your demand, the better, as you have got me in a hole, and I don't see any way of getting out of it except by giving up my wealth."

"That is as true as preaching. Shell out!" the Red Wolf chief cried.

With extreme reluctance Wallace handed his money to the road-agent, and the eyes of the outlaw sparkled through the holes in his mask as he noted the large amount.

"Don't make any mistake and forget to give up all yer wealth," the masked man continued. "Lean Joe, I reckon you had better go through Mister Wallace, so as to make sure that he hasn't made any mistake."

"It is not necessary," the rancher protested.

"Oh, that is all right—part of our reg'lar peppergram, you know," the outlaw chief explained. "I must keep the boys right up to the mark or else they will get rusty."

Knowing that it was useless to resist, the rancher submitted to be searched, although it was with decided reluctance.

It was as he had stated though—he had surrendered all his money.

"There is my watch," Wallace remarked.

"Oh, that is all right!" the outlaw replied. "We don't want your ticker. Watches ain't in our way, nohow! You kin keep that to remember us by," and then the man laughed, hoarsely, as though he considered that he had said a good thing.

"Much obliged! although I do not think that I will be apt to forget this meeting with you for some time."

"No, I reckon not. We Red Wolves of Wichita generally make a big impression when we set out to do it." Then he turned to the Double-crossman.

"Now, Mister Maxwell, if you will jist pony up your wealth we will be much obliged."

"My dear fellow, I reckon that two dollars is the extent of my pile!" Maxwell exclaimed.

"Is that all?" exclaimed the road-agent, as the rancher fingered the silver dollars in his hand.

"Every cent, as I am a sinner!" the Double-crossman replied. "You see you ought to have struck me before I had the little poker game with my friend hyer, although it doesn't really make much difference, for you have got the money from him, just the same."

"We will have to go through you, so as to make sure that there isn't any mistake," the outlaw remarked.

"I have no objection, but I assure you that you will only have your labor for your pains," the rancher replied.

The search was made though, but, as Maxwell had declared, he was cleaned out.

"I have a watch also," he remarked, after the outlaw, who answered to the name of Lean Joe, reported that he had no money.

"You kin keep that, and the two dollars too!" the outlaw chief announced. "I want you to understand that the Red Wolves of Wichita are a gang of high-toned roosters, and we don't play no low-down games. We never skin a man of all he has got. We ain't so bad as you poker-players. Now, gents, we'll relieve you of your we'pons, which we will leave at the Express office for you to-morrow, and don't ye move until ten minutes are up."

The ranchers were disarmed, and then the road-agents mounted their steeds, which were behind the house, and rode away.

When the ten minutes elapsed, the ranchers returned to the town, and roused the citizens, whom they astonished with the tale of the robbery.

A party was immediately formed, and started in pursuit of the road-agents.

The expedition was not successful, for no trace of the outlaws could be discovered; and after a long and weary ride the citizens returned to Greenville.

Evidently the outlaw band was led by an extremely able rascal.

CHAPTER XX.

THE STREET ENCOUNTER.

THE bold robbery of Alex Wallace, and the unsuccessful pursuit of the road-agents, created a deal of excitement in Greenville, and it was the general opinion that something ought to be done, but no one seemed able to decide what.

If Wallace, who had mustered his friends and taken the trail within a few hours after the robbery, was not able to catch the robbers, or even to find a trace of them, it did not seem likely that another expedition would be more fortunate.

The opinion of the Lone Hand was freely asked in regard to the matter, for since his victory over the cowboy he was thought to be one of the chiefs of the town, but the man-hunter was non-committal.

"Really, I am not much of a hand for giving advice," he replied to one and all, "but it seems to me that no regular expedition stands any chance of catching these Red Wolves, for they are so thoroughly acquainted with the country, that when they get wind that a gang is after them it is an easy matter for them to find places of concealment in the mountains, and to hunt them down would be like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay. Now, if the town really means business, let the citizens chip in and raise a fund, so as to be able to offer a reward of so much a head for these outlaws, dead or alive—say a hundred or two hundred apiece; then some men who are fond of speculating may go in for the cash."

After considerable consultation the townsmen came to the conclusion that this was good advice and a fund was raised, Alex Wallace putting in the first hundred dollars, and, altogether, eight hundred odd dollars were raised.

The getters-up of the fund had calculated that the old Jew would chip in a hundred, at the least, but, to their astonishment, Goldsburg refused to put up a cent.

"No, no, mine gootness, no!" he declared, emphatically. "Dot ish blood-money! I will not do it! Der Red Wolves treated me like a gentleman, although they did take der monish. I am not anxious to have dem fellows come in der middle of der night and kill me in mine bed, mine gootness, no!" And the ancient Hebrew stuck to this with heroic firmness.

But after the fund was raised, no one seemed to be desirous of going after the outlaws, and so securing some of the money.

"It will take time," the Lone Hand remarked. "Rome was not built in a day. Wait till some man in the town gets broke, and wants money pretty badly, then he'll be apt to go gunning for the Red Wolves."

This seemed likely, and so the excitement gradually died away.

Three days passed since the one on the night of which the rancher was robbed, and nothing worthy of mention occurred to disturb the quiet of Greenville.

The sports of the town, who were always on the watch for excitement, had anticipated that there would be a shooting-match between the cowboy pards, George Hardacre, Reddy Gallagher and the stranger, Mister Hand, as he was generally termed.

That George Hardacre would be satisfied to rest content with the thrashing he had received, few men in the town believed, and as time passed on without his attempting to get "square," the wise-heads came to the conclusion that he was waiting for a favorable opportunity, so that he could not fail to take vengeance upon the man who had conquered him so easily.

Meanwhile the Lone Hand's horse had got well of its lameness so he was able to make excursions in the neighborhood of the town, which he did daily; "looking for some good land," he gave as a reason for his rides.

Returning from one of these trips the Lone Hand rode up the main street of Greenville one pleasant afternoon.

It was near supper-time, and half the population of the town was in the street.

As the Lone Hand, advancing at a walk, breathing the horse after a sharp gallop, came within fifty feet of the Cowboy's Home Saloon, out from the door of the bar-room jumped George Hardacre, revolver in hand.

But quick as he was he did not succeed in getting the "drop" on the horseman, for with wonderful swiftness the Lone Hand got his revolver out, cocking it as he did so, and the two confronted each other, pistol in hand, less than fifty feet intervening between them.

The Lone Hand was riding in soldier fashion with the left hand on the reins, so that his right was free to handle his weapon.

"Are you heeled all right?" cried the cowboy, somewhat nonplused to find that he had not succeeded in his attempt to take the stranger at a disadvantage.

"Yes, I reckon I am, as you ought to be able to see with half an eye," the Lone Hand replied.

"Have you said yer prayers?" the other cried, loudly.

Having failed in his design to get the "drop" on his foe, it was his game now to divert his attention by talking so as to secure an advantage.

"Oh, no, I haven't come to that yet."

"You are mighty near death, though!" the cowboy declared, boastfully.

"You are no prophet, nor the son of a prophet, so I doubt your prediction," the Lone Hand rejoined.

"I reckon you thought you were all through with me?" the cowboy exclaimed. "But I kin jest tell you that I am one of that kind of men who can't be walked over! It was your game the other day, but now it is mine, and I am going to pay you off in full for the hammering you gave me."

"See here! haven't you made some mistake about this matter?" the man-hunter inquired.

"A mistake?" asked the other, doubtfully.

"Yes, you say that this is your game, but you are away off, for it isn't! It is not anybody's game at present. You haven't secured any advantage, and I stand just as good a chance to lay you out as you do to plug me, and if your game is to throw me off my guard by this bravado talk, I can tell you, right now, that you might as well save your breath, for the game will not work for a cent!"

The people in the street had been so taken by surprise by the unexpected opening of hostilities that for the first few moments they only stood and stared at the pair, but now that they had time to think about the matter, they began to get out of the line of fire, for that there was going to be a bloody fight no one doubted.

Neither man could claim an advantage, and for this reason the cowboy hesitated to begin the fight.

It had been his calculation to take the other by surprise, and, as he had failed in his attempt, he was rather uncertain about how to proceed.

A fair and square battle with the stranger was not what he desired, but as things had turned out this seemed to be the best he could do, for now that he had confronted his foe, "gun" in hand, he could not back out without rendering himself the laughing-stock of the town.

To continue the conversation was only a waste of time, for it was plain the stranger was no novice at this sort of thing and could not be thrown off his guard.

Then an idea flashed into the cowboy's mind.

"Say! hadn't you better h'st down off of that hoss so you kin fight me on foot?" he asked.

"Oh, no, I am very well satisfied as I am," the Lone Hand replied. "I can fight you just as well on horseback as on foot, and if you don't like the way the thing is running you can pull your freight; clear out as soon as you like! This quarrel is of your seeking, and if you don't like the conditions you are not obliged to go on with it."

For answer, the cowboy suddenly blazed away at the Lone Hand, and the other returned the fire immediately.

The two shots were fired so near together that they seemed like one long report.

Owing to the circumstances, Hardacre was not able to take careful aim, and was obliged to trust to a snap-shot.

The cowboy was a fair marksman, but, in the excitement of the moment, elevated the muzzle of his weapon a trifle high—it was a novelty to him to stand upon the ground and fire at a man on horseback, so the bullet cut through the cloth of the Lone Hand's coat, just grazing the skin of the shoulder.

But the Lone Hand, fully as expert in shooting from the saddle as on the ground, was more successful, for he put a bullet in the cowboy's side which brought him to the ground.

No sooner was the cowboy upon the ground than a new actor appeared upon the scene.

Around the corner of a house on the opposite side of the street from the Cowboy's Home came George Hardacre's pard, Reddy Gallagher, revolver in hand, and he immediately opened fire upon the horseman.

But the Lone Hand was not taken by surprise by this sudden, and, to all but himself, unexpected attack.

The man-hunter had noticed that from the moment the cowboy made his appearance he glanced every now and then at the opposite side of the street, and, being an old hand at this sort of thing, the Lone Hand suspected that the cowboy had a pard in readiness there to attack him, and so he had been careful to face in such a way that he could not be surprised.

And when the second cowboy made his appearance, simultaneously the Lone Hand slipped off his horse, so as to interpose the body of the animal between himself and his antagonist, and from under the horse's neck he returned the fire.

The steed, struck by one of the balls, but only slightly wounded, made a dash down the street, and the man-hunter advanced rapidly upon the cowboy.

Gallagher had been using a double-action revolver, and not having to stop in order to cock the weapon had fired all six of the barrels in rapid succession, and now, when the chambers of the revolver were emptied, he found that he had not succeeded in disabling the man whom he had attacked.

He dropped the now useless weapon and attempted to draw another one from his belt, but hardly had he got it out when a shot from the Lone Hand's pistol knocked it from his hand.

For a moment the shock almost paralyzed him, and then, as the Lone Hand was within a yard, he drew his heavy ten-inch bowie-knife.

But the man-hunter was prepared for just such a movement.

He clutched his revolver by the nozzle and dealt the cowboy a fearful blow over the head with the butt.

Down went Reddy Gallagher, like a log, stunned by the terrific blow.

The fight was ended and the Lone Hand had scored another victory.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE CALABOOSE.

THE encounter was about the fiercest fight that Greenville had ever seen, and by the time it was ended almost the entire population of the town was in the street.

Both of the cowboys being laid out, for by this time George Hardacre had fainted from loss of blood, the citizens came from their hiding-places and gathered around the actors in the fight.

"Gentlemen, have you got such a thing as a marshal in this town of Greenville?" the Lone Hand asked, proceeding to recharge his revolver as he spoke, thus showing that he was an old hand at this kind of game.

"Hyer I am!" cried a tall, muscular fellow, with a hard-looking face, stepping forward. "I am Bud McCracken, marshal of this hyer town of Greenville."

"You are the man I want to see; I want you to arrest this fellow who attempted to murder me without my being allowed a chance for my life!" the Lone Hand declared. "I have no complaint to make against the other man. He gave me a fair fight, but this fellow tried to kill me without warning."

"Yes, yes, that is so!" yelled a dozen voices.

Ever since the founding of the town there had been bad blood between the citizens and the cowboys, and the men of Greenville were not sorry to see these two desperadoes come to grief. So, with much exultation, the marshal, assisted by a host of volunteers, lugged Reddy Gallagher off to the calaboose, while George

Hardacre was carried into the Cowboy's Home and a doctor called for.

The medical sharp of Greenville was on the spot. Timothy Jones was the name by which he was known, and he was a middle-aged, short, fat man, decidedly addicted to the use of strong liquor, but as he had a remarkably hard head, it was seldom that drink got the better of him so that he was not able to attend to his business.

He was really a pretty good doctor, and had a good practice in a Southern city until he got into trouble and was compelled to emigrate. The doctor examined the cowboy and succeeded in extracting the ball, which had struck a rib and passed around to the side just under the skin.

"A narrow squeeze for this man," the doctor remarked. "An inch higher or lower and there would have been one cowboy less on these hyer Texan plains. As it is, he is merely suffering from the shock, and in a week, or so, will be around all right."

The doctor also went to the calaboose to see if Reddy Gallagher needed any attention, but by the time he got there the cowboy had recovered from the effects of the whack he had received, and was raging in a terrible way at the injustice, as he termed it, of his being locked up.

Black Jack Thompson, as the keeper of the calaboose was termed, his name having the prefix attached to it on account of the darkness of his complexion, and the marshal were in conversation with the imprisoned ruffian when the doctor arrived.

And in answer to the doctor's inquiry if his case needed any looking into, the cowboy exclaimed in scorn:

"What kind of a galoot do you think I am anyway? Do you s'pose a leetle knock on the noddle is going to lay a man like me up? No, sir-ee, hossfly!"

"Then you are all right," the doctor remarked.

"You kin jest bet I am! I reckon it would take a hundred or two of sich suckers to send me over the range."

"Wa-al, all I have got to say is that, to my thinking, you have come out of the thing mighty well," the marshal remarked.

"You bet!" the jailer exclaimed, and the doctor coincided. All three had witnessed the encounter from beginning to end.

"When you emptied your gun so durned quick and the stranger came at you, it was my reckoning that he was going to fill you full of holes, and you can jest thank your lucky stars that he took it into his head to give you a crack on the skull instead."

"I reckon he didn't have a shot left," the cowboy observed. "For that was the fix I was in."

"Oh, you fired two shots to his one," the marshal observed. "And if he hadn't played that mighty sharp trick of sliding down behind his hoss I reckon you would have got him, for sure!"

"I would have got him anyway if it had not been for that durned self-cocker!" the cowboy declared. "It ain't a tool that I am used to, but I have heard them cracked up so much that I went in to get one, but I will never use one ag'in as long as I live."

"Wa-al, I have allers thought them pretty handy we'pons, though I never owned one," the jailer remarked.

"That is my opinion too!" the marshal declared.

"You don't have to stop to cock them," the doctor observed.

"That is all right, but they ain't near as quick on the fire as a regular revolver is arter you git the hammer up," the cowboy declared. "One single tug; down comes yer hammer and away the bullet goes, but with these cussed self-cockers, it takes 'bout twice as long a pull, for you have got to git the hammer up and then it has to come down ag'in, and that takes time now, sure as ye'r born!"

"I reckon thar is a good deal of truth in this hyer statement of Gallagher," the marshal remarked with an air of great wisdom.

"You kin bet yer life on it every time!" the cowboy declared, emphatically.

"If it had not been for using the self-cocker, I would have got that long-legged son of a gun at the first crack!" Reddy Gallagher continued. "I had a sure enuff bead drawn on him, but the long pull gave him time to slide off his hoss, and so I missed."

"But you everlastingly pumped the lead at him after the first shot," the jailer remarked.

"Ah, yes, but it was no good then; the dog was dead! I ought to have got him on the first crack," the cowboy observed, regretfully. "I had a splendid chance, but arter he was behind the hoss, then it was no good, and, someway, I did not seem to be able to shoot straight. Mebbe it was because I was in too much of a hurry; I dunno, but the bullets didn't go whar I wanted 'em to. I had five shots, and I ought to have fetched my man with one of them, but I couldn't do it, somehow."

"I knew a sharp once, who was the biggest kind of a chief with all kinds of we'pons, pistols, rifles and sich like, you know," the marshal observed in a reflective way. "And he allers

allowed that with these self-cockers a man had to be extra keerful 'bout his aim, 'cos the long pull had a tendency to swerve the muzzle of the revolver round to the right, and if a shooter had a bead on his man, and the gun pulled round a half-inch to the right, it meant a foot or two out of the way for the bullet."

"I reckon he is right, but I ain't no sharp to figger sich things right down to a fine p'int," the cowboy replied. "One thing is sart'in, though. I didn't git my game, and I reckon I would, if it hadn't been for the self-cocker. But, I say, Doc, how is my pard?" he asked, abruptly changing the conversation.

"Oh, he will be all right in a week or so," the doctor replied, and then related the particulars in regard to Hardacre's wound.

"Wal, I am glad of that!" the cowboy declared. "This hyer wasn't no fight of mine, nohow, and I jist went in to help my pard out."

"It would have been better for you if you had kept out," the marshal remarked, grimly.

"That is jest what I am coming to—this hyer locking me up in this calaboose—it is a durned outrage, so it is!" the cowboy exclaimed, indignantly. "Things have come to a nice state in this hyer town of Greenville if two gents can't settle a leetle quarrel with guns in the street without being hauled off to the calaboose—the galoot what has the misfortune to get the worst of the skirmish, I mean."

"Oh, see hyer, go slow, old man," the marshal remarked. "You ain't got the thing right at all. Greenville don't put on any more frills 'bout an affair of this kind than any other town in Texas. The two gents who were in the fight are all right, nobody hain't said nothing to them, but you was a third party who rushed into the thing without having any call to do so."

"Wasn't my pard in the fight?" cried the cowboy, indignantly.

"Of course, and he ought to have been able to hoe his own row without any assistance from you, or anybody else. He was the man who got up the fight, and when you popped into the thing it r'ally looked as if you and Hardacre had arranged a plan to skin the stranger without giving him any chance for his life."

"It was jest accident that I happened to come along when the fight was going on," the cowboy declared.

There was a general expression of unbelief from all the listeners at this statement.

"Oh, come down, now!" the marshal exclaimed. "That is entirely too thin! You ought to know better than to put out sich a yarn as that. I reckon you don't expect any one to believe it?"

"'Tain't nothing but the truth!" the cowboy declared, doggedly.

"Oh, no, that won't go down, nohow!" the jailer exclaimed. "You know well enough that you were hiding behind the house on purpose to get a good crack at this Mister Hand arter yer pard got at him."

"'Tain't so!" Gallagher cried, stoutly.

"Oh, bosh!" exclaimed the marshal in contempt. "It ain't no use for you to attempt to pull the wool over anybody's eyes. The hull town is onto the game, and I jest tell yer, I showed that I was a friend of yourn by lugging you off to the calaboose, for I reckon if I hadn't done so, you would have got in a heap of trouble from the way the boys were talking."

"That is as true as Gospel!" the doctor declared. "I myself heard at least a dozen say that you ought to be strung up to the nearest tree, instead of being carried to the calaboose."

The swarthy face of the ruffian grew a shade paler, and an anxious look came into his eyes.

"Sho! Do you think they meant it?" he asked.

"You bet they did, and I had you lugged off hyer right quick, so as to avoid trouble."

"Wal, how do you s'pose this thing is going to end?" the cowboy asked.

"Oh, I dunno, but I'm afeard that you're in a tight place," the marshal replied.

"I'll git out all right, I reckon!" the cowboy declared, endeavoring to assume a cheerful air.

"Wa-al, I hope so."

This ended the interview, and the marshal and doctor departed, leaving the jailer and prisoner to entertain each other.

CHAPTER XXII.

A WARNING.

TIME passed away wearily enough to the two men in the calaboose, for as the jail was an extremely primitive affair, being nothing more than a common board shanty, a single-room building, the jailer, Black Jack, felt compelled to remain with the prisoner, for, as he had observed on various occasions, if the men imprisoned in the building were not restrained by a wholesome respect for the law, they could easily make their escape by kicking out the "end board of the shanty."

After the marshal and doctor departed there was silence for a few minutes: Gallagher was meditating on what the marshal had said.

"Say, Black Jack, is it a sure enuff fact that these Greenville galoots have got it in for me?" the cowboy asked, abruptly breaking the silence.

"Oh, yes, you've got it as straight as a string," the jailer assented.

"Durn me if I understand it at all," the cowboy declared, shaking his head in a bewildered way. "Things have come to a mighty state, I must say, when a man is going to be hauled up for sticking to his pard when he gets into a row."

"Ah, yes, but Reddy, old man, you don't see the p'int," the jailer remarked. "You didn't give this stranger a fair shake; that is what the town has got it in for you for; ther' were two ov you a-bucking ag'in' one man."

"Yes, I s'pose we did wade in to round him up kinder roughly," the other admitted.

"Old man, thar ain't a doubt on it. Greenville is booming right along, I will allow, but she ain't putting on so much style that two gents can't settle a personal difficulty with guns in the street, if they want to arrange the picnic that way, without anybody gitting their back up at it. The trouble is that you tried to play roots on the stranger and went in to double-bank him."

"Yes, mebbe it does look that way," the other admitted.

"Sart'in! thar's no doubt 'bout it, and I tell you the town is right mad at you!"

"It 'pears to me that thar's being a heap of fuss kicked up 'bout a leetle thing," the cowboy growled.

"Wal, you see you cowboys have put on a heap of airs 'round the town for a long while, and the citizens are coming to the opinion that it is about time the thing was played; they reckon that they ain't going to allow you 'uns to come inter the town and go gunning for your men whenever you feel like it."

"Wa-al, so long as the thing slipped up, what difference does it make?" Reddy Gallagher exclaimed, in deep disgust.

"When you come down to the rights of the thing it is me and my pard that ought to kick!" the cowboy continued, indignantly. "We are the cusses what got left! What is this man got to kick about, I would like to know? Didn't he lay George Hardacre out, and, I reckon, came within an ace of killing him? Didn't he give me a lick on the head hard enuff to stun an ox, and you kin bet that if my skull wasn't extra thick he would have split it open! As it was it laid me out stiff!"

"Oh, you did come out at the leetle end of the horn, no mistake 'bout that!" the jailer assented.

"You bet! and, as I said afore, if thar is any kicking to be done me and my pard are the ones who ought to do it."

"Mebbe so, but between me and the bedpost, Reddy, you won't git the town to look at it in that way."

This ended the discussion, and the two conversed upon other matters, of no particular interest to the reader for awhile, then the conversation flagged, and both were beginning to feel decidedly bored when Black Jack, who was an inveterate card-player, suddenly thought that if the cowboy had any money to lose, a little game of poker would help to pass the time away.

The cowboy was in funds, and jumped eagerly at the suggestion, and so the two sat down to a quiet little game of "draw."

As the pair were pretty evenly matched, neither man being able to boast that he was a much better player than his opponent, and luck favored first one and then the other, the game was interesting and served capitably to pass away the time.

Night came on. Supper was sent in, the pair shared it, and then renewed their game. A lantern suspended from the wall afforded light.

About eight o'clock the marshal ushered Alex Wallace into the jail.

"Hyers yer boss come to see yer!" McCracken announced, and then withdrew.

The players had just finished a hand when the rancher entered.

"Taking it easy, I see!" Wallace observed.

"Yes, thur's nothing like a man making himself comfortable," the cowboy answered.

"I am sorry you have got into this trouble," the rancher remarked. "I have just come to town, and as soon as I heard about the difficulty I came to see you."

"Much obliged," the cowboy responded, with a ceremonious bow. "But it ain't any more than what I expected, boss, for I knowed that you ain't the kind of a man to go back on one of your boys when he gits into trouble."

"Oh, no, I always stick up for my men as well as I can, although in this case you have cut out a pretty hard job for me, if what I hear around town is true."

"Oh, you kin bet yer bottom dollar that the hull town is down on us two cowboys!" Gallagher cried.

"Well, if the account I have heard is true the citizens have good reason to be mad," Wallace remarked, gravely. "They say that you two jumped on this Mr. Hand, and if he hadn't been an extra good man you would certainly have laid him out."

"Didn't he pretty near hammer the life out of Hardacre?" the cowboy exclaimed, sulkily.

"Yes, but even if he did, two of you ought not to have jumped on this stranger without warning; the man was entitled to a fair show. I reckon you must have been pretty drunk, Gallagher, or else you would not have been mixed up with the affair."

"Drunk!" the cowboy said, slowly, as if in doubt.

"Yes, that is what I have told everybody who spoke to me about the affair," Wallace replied, a world of meaning in his tone. "I said that if you had not been drunk you would not have taken any part in the fight, for I knew you to be too good a man to want to take any unfair advantage, particularly of a stranger."

"Oh, yes," Gallagher said, slowly, a sudden light breaking in upon him, for the words of his boss had suggested an excuse for his conduct which had not occurred to him before.

"Wal, I s'pose I might as well own up that I had been h'isting in the liquor pretty freely all day long, and I reckon I was full, right up to the neck, or else I wouldn't have gone inter the fight, 'cos it was no consarn of mine, no-how!"

"That is just what I have been telling the boys, and I didn't suppose you really knew what you were doing when you opened fire on the stranger."

"Yes, I reckon I was near crazy with the rum, and that is the reason why I wasn't able to hit the galoot, but I tell yer, after I got that welt on the head I sobered up mighty quick."

"That is so!" the jailer asserted. "I wouldn't have thought you had been h'isting much."

"Reddy is one of the still drunkards, and it is hard work to tell when he is full, up to the neck, as you might say," Wallace remarked.

"That is so, I don't show it much, but when I get excited, and the liquor is in me, I git crazy, and I s'pose that is why I tried to jump onto the stranger."

"Well, keep a stiff upper lip; I will do the best I can to get you out," Wallace declared. "Don't let the trouble keep you awake, for I reckon we will be able to pull you out, some way. When this stranger understands that you were full of liquor, the chances are that he will not be hard on you." And with this assurance the rancher withdrew.

"Now we will go on with the game," Black Jack observed, and while he was shuffling the cards the cowboy meditated upon the words of Alex Wallace.

"Don't let the trouble keep you awake," he muttered to himself. "That means that I am to be on the lookout; I reckon the boss is going to work some game to-night."

"All right! he will find me ready and willing."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LONE HAND'S OFFER.

THE pair began their game again, but in about twenty minutes were interrupted by the entrance of the marshal, who brought in the Lone Hand. The jailer looked surprised, and the cowboy glanced angrily at the man-hunter.

"Reddy, this gentleman wants to have a leetle talk with you," the marshal said. "Jack, come out a minute; I've got something to say to you."

The prisoner guessed at once that this was an excuse to get the jailer out of the apartment so that the stranger could speak to him in private, having evidently come to an understanding in regard to this matter with the marshal.

In the breast of the cowboy rankled a feeling of bitter anger as he gazed upon the man who had succeeded in defeating him in such a signal manner, but realizing that it would be better not to allow the other to understand just how he felt, he choked down his resentment and strove to appear calm and indifferent.

The Lone Hand took the chair which the jailer had vacated.

"Well, how do you find yourself?" he asked, fixing his clear, stern eyes on the face of the cowboy.

"Oh, I'm out of bed and able to get away with my three squar' meals, I reckon, although you did try yer best to crack my skull with the butt of your revolver."

"No, you are wrong there, I did *not* try my best, for I could have hit you twice as hard if I had been so minded," the man-hunter replied, and he spoke in a quiet way, utterly free from any trace of boasting.

The cowboy looked at him for a moment and his brows knitted.

"Wal, mebbe you could," he said, sullenly. "But I reckon I ain't anxious for to have you try it on ag'in."

"Once is enough, and enough is as good as a feast, eh?" the Lone Hand remarked, with a pleasant smile; as though he thought the matter to be a good joke.

"Yes, I have had all I want."

"You got off better than your pard, although his wound is not dangerous, and it is likely he will be on his feet again in a week or so."

"Yes, so I heard."

"Gallagher, do you know that I could just as well killed you as to have laid you out with

that rap on the head?" the Lone Hand said, abruptly.

"No, I don't know that you could," the cowboy replied, in a dogged way. "I reckon 'tain't so either, for if you could have made an end of me, it is my opinion that you would have done it."

"You would not have spared a foe under like circumstances, eh?"

"No, you kin jest bet I wouldn't!" cried the cowboy, bluntly.

"But I spared you though, for all of your doubt."

"You used the butt of your pistol because you hadn't a shot left! Jest the same way I was fixed," Gallagher declared.

"Oh, no; I only fired four shots and had two left when I closed in on you, and either one of them would have closed your account with this world, if I had felt disposed to cut your thread of life in twain."

"And why didn't ye, if you had the power?" the cowboy demanded.

"Well, in the first place I am not a blood-thirsty man," the other replied. "When I had you completely in my power—could have killed you, if I had desired, I chose to spare your life, although you had made a wanton attack on me and would have murdered me if you could."

"Wal, you hammered my pard, 'sides I was drunk at the time, and didn't know what I was doing."

"Oho! that is to be the excuse, eh?" the Lone Hand exclaimed. "That is a new dodge! Who gave you that idea, for I will be bound that you never thought of trying any game of that kind yourself."

"It is so, anyhow!" the cowboy cried, stoutly.

"Oh, no; you were not drunk!" the man-hunter exclaimed with a decided shake of the head.

"No man under the influence of liquor would have been able to handle his revolver with the carefulness and rapidity that you displayed. I know better than that. You may have had a drink or two, but you had not taken enough to hurt you; decidedly, you were not drunk."

"I am one of the kind that don't show the liquor even when I am full as a tick!" the cowboy declared, sulkily.

"It is too thin, that dodge will not work!" the other replied. "Who put the idea into your head—your boss, the rancher, Alex Wallace?"

"No, he didn't," Gallagher growled, annoyed at the shrewd guess that the stranger had made.

"I judge from what I have heard that Wallace is a pretty shrewd fellow, but I fancy it will tax all his smartness to get you out of this hole into which you have tumbled."

"Oh, I reckon I ain't in much of a hole!" Gallagher cried, defiantly.

"You think not?"

"I know I ain't!"

"You will change your mind in regard to this, I fancy, before you are two or three days older, or I am greatly mistaken."

"I reckon not!"

"You have attempted to murder me, and it is my intention to push the charge against you."

"I ain't afeard to be tried; you wasn't hurt, nohow, and I reckon they won't put it to me very tough!"

"You fancy that you are going to be tried here, I suppose?"

"In course!"

"Oh, no!"

"Why not?" the cowboy demanded in astonishment.

"Because you are going to be turned over to the State authorities. There are a party of rangers at Mangum, and I have sent a messenger, requesting them to hurry over here as soon as possible, to take charge of you."

The cowboy glared at the speaker for a moment, and then he shook his head in a dogged, defiant way.

"I ain't afeard of no rangers, and I don't kear a cuss whar I am tried, for I reckon I will get shut of the thing somehow?"

"I know of a way by means of which you can get out of this scrape, and be able to put a lot of money in your pocket, too," the Lone Hand remarked.

The cowboy looked at the man-hunter suspiciously for a moment.

"What are you giving me?" he cried.

"A chance which you will improve if you are wise," the other rejoined.

"Durned if I understand what you mean!"

"Do you know how it was that your pard happened to quarrel with me?"

"No, how should I know?"

The answer was given with apparent honesty enough, but there was an expression in the eyes of the man which belied his words.

"He made an offer to me which I rejected, and so we quarreled," the Lone Hand explained.

"But I have been thinking the matter over since, and have come to the conclusion that I ought to have gone into the thing. He proposed that we start for the Wichita Mountains, and hunt up the hiding-place of these outlaws who call themselves the Red Wolves of Wichita. Your pard thought there was big money in it, but I didn't, for he did not explain the matter so I could understand it; but I have been thinking it over, and I comprehend now what he was

driving at. He knows exactly where to strike these outlaws, and, I suppose, of course, that you possess the same knowledge. That is what I didn't get into my head in the first place, or else I would have been willing to have made some arrangement with him, but I did not want to go on any wild-goose chase."

"Ye-es," the cowboy said, slowly, apparently not knowing exactly what to make of this revelation.

"I can see now that there is big money in it," the Lone Hand continued, not taking any notice of the lukewarm way in which his words were being received by the other. And I am sorry that I did not jump at the offer, but it is not too late, if you care to go into the thing. There is good money in it for us, eight hundred to a thousand dollars at the least, and then I will see that you get clear of the scrape that you are now in."

It was plain that the cowboy was greatly puzzled by something, the expression upon his features showed that, and he shook his head in an undecided way.

Then he bent his eyes upon the ground and appeared to be deeply engaged in meditating.

The Lone Hand watched him with the eyes of a hawk.

In a few minutes Gallagher raised his head, cast a sideways glance at the man-hunter, and said:

"Say! I don't see no money in ar' scheme for me."

"Is that so?" the other asked in a surprised tone.

"Nary time! I don't know anything 'bout these Red Wolves or the Wichita Mountain country either, but I do reckon that the galoots who go arter the Red Wolves will have to keep their eyes open dreadful wide or else they will git skinned in the worst kind of way."

"That is your opinion, eh?"

"You bet! I hain't lost any outlaws, and I don't want any Red Wolves in mine."

"There's big money in it, you know," the Lone Hand remarked, persuasively. "And then you will get clear of this trouble, too."

"Oh, I ain't worryin' any 'bout that!" the cowboy exclaimed, defiantly. "I don't kear a durn if the rangers are coming. You can't skeer me! I reckon I kin see yer game jest as well as if I had planned it myself. You think I know something 'bout these Red Wolves, and you reckon you kin make me give it up, but you can't, for I don't know nothing, and what a man don't know, he can't tell."

"That is strongly argued, and it is certain that you cannot tell what you do not know, but from the way your pard spoke, I felt certain, when I came to reflect upon his words, that he had some pointers in regard to the Red Wolves which would be valuable to any man who wanted to make a big stake by capturing them."

"Mebbe he has, but I don't know anything about it," the cowboy declared.

"Then you don't care to go into the scheme?"

"Not any of it in mine, thank you!" the other responded, with a grin, for the thought that he had baffled the man who had conquered him was pleasant to the cowboy.

"Well, I reckon I will have to put the screws on you, then," the Lone Hand remarked, rising.

"You kin pitch in and do yer durndest, for all I kear!" Gallagher exclaimed, defiantly. "I reckon I have got as many friends in this hyer county as you have, and they will stand up for me, too."

"That is the right thing for friends to do," the Lone Hand observed, seemingly not to be at all disturbed by the cowboy's rejection of his proposal. "I reckoned that there was a chance to make a big stake, and that is what I am up in this country for, but if you don't know anything about the Red Wolves or the Wichita Mountain region, you would not be of any more use to me than any man whom I might pick up in the street."

"That is so, and I don't—that's honest," the cowboy declared. "You can just bet all yer ducats that if I saw a chance to make a big stake I would go for it lively!"

"You would be very foolish if you did not avail yourself of the chance!" the Lone Hand declared.

"I would do it, of course; but, stranger, you ain't got the thing right; you have made some mistake about my pard knowing anything 'bout these Red Wolves, although I reckon he is posted 'bout the Wichita Mountain country, for I am his old side-pard, yer know, and he would have been sure to let me into the game if he had an idea that he could make big money."

"Well, he certainly made a proposal to me to go in for these Red Wolves, and from the way he spoke he gave me the idea that he knew all about them."

"Wal, he don't!" the cowboy exclaimed, decidedly. "You see the fact is, stranger, you can't allers depend on what George Hardacre says. 'Tain't for me to say anything ag'in' my pard of course, but anybody that knows George knows that when he gets a leetle whisky on board he kin lie as fast as a boss kin trot, and the bigger the yarn the better he likes it."

"Is that so?" asked the Lone Hand, as if astonished at the statement.

"Sure as ye'r born! He was just getting you on a string, stranger, and don't you ferget it!"

"Maybe he was, but he seemed to be all right."

"That is his way allers! It comes easier for him to lie than it does to tell the truth!" the cowboy declared.

"Oh, well, if that is the case, I will not bother with the affair, but I thought that with a man who was posted a stake might be made," and after this observation the Lone Hand took his departure; his place was speedily supplied by the jailer and again the card game went on.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE WATCH.

IN the street the Lone Hand stopped to exchange a few words with the marshal.

"Did you succeed in gitting anything out of him?" Bud McCracken asked.

"Not a thing!"

"Wa-al, I didn't reckon you would," the marshal remarked. "You see, stranger, the thing is jest as I told yer. George Hardacre picked a quarrel with you out of pure deviltry—thar is no other name for it, and when you licked him so durned badly he made up his mind to git squar' with you if it took a leg!"

"That was natural, I suppose, under the circumstances."

"Oh, yes, 'most any man would have felt in that way, and I reckon he made a bee line for his pard for to git him to help to squar' up with you."

"Well, the attack on me by the cowboy was so entirely unprovoked that I had a suspicion that Hardacre might have been set on by someone, though it was a mystery why any one would want to do it, seeing that I was a stranger—in the town, and have not been here long enough to make any enemies."

"Oh, no, thar wasn't anything of that kind!" the official declared. "I told you that before you went in to see the galoot. I knew you wouldn't git anything out of him, 'cos why, thar wasn't nothing to get."

"That is certainly a good strong reason."

"Thar's no mistake 'bout it. It was all pure deviltry, I tell ye. Hardacre told you that thar was big money to be made by going arter the Red Wolves, 'cos he knew the odds were big that you wouldn't have anything to do with it, and then he would have an excuse to pick a fuss with you. That was his little game. He wanted a fight."

"Well, he succeeded in getting it," the Lone Hand remarked with a quiet smile.

This remark appealed forcibly to the marshal's sense of humor, and he "haw, haw'd!" right out.

"Yes, you bet he did—got it red-hot, too, right off the griddle! I don't reckon that thar ever was a man in this hyer county of Greer who made a bigger mistake!"

"How about the prisoner—do you think you will be able to keep him all right?"

"Oh, yes, thar won't be no difficulty 'bout that?" the marshal assented, confidently. "I know the calaboose is not so strong as it might be, but Black Jack will stay inside with him, and I am going to put a couple of men as guards to keep watch outside."

"Do you think that there is any danger of the cowboys making a raid on the town during the night for the purpose of rescuing the man?" the Lone Hand asked.

"Oh, no, they wouldn't try any sich game as that!"

"But such things have been done," the man-hunter urged.

"Yes, that is so, but thar isn't any danger of the game being worked hyer—not to-night, anyhow," the marshal replied, full of confidence.

"I suppose you calculate that there has not been time for the cowboys to talk the thing over and make arrangements for a raid?"

"That is the way I reckon."

"But if such a game was to be worked, the quicker it was worked the better."

"Yes, that is true, but, stranger, you don't know these cowboys as well as I do," the marshal remarked in a patronizing way. "I have lived right among 'em for years, and I reckon no man in this hyer State of Texas knows 'em any better than I do; I know 'em from A to izzard, and when the galoots go in to work a trick of this kind, they always do a heap of chinning afore they git good and ready. In three or four days thar might be danger of thar gitting up a surprise party, and dusting inter the town for to git thar pard out of the calaboose, but you kin bet yer sweet life that I will have plenty of warning that something is up, and gobs of time to get ready for them."

"Ah, yes, I suppose so; you ought to know."

"You bet! I'm no tenderfoot!"

"It is not advisable then to raise a force to guard the jail?"

"Oh, no!" the official declared, emphatically.

"No use turning the town upside down until the cowboys begin to growl, then I will git an outfit ready, and if they dare to come inter Greerville on any monkey business I will make it warm for them, you bet!"

"I see you understand the situation," the Lone

Hand remarked, to which the marshal returned a confident "Bet yer life!" and the interview ended.

The man-hunter proceeded toward the hotel, sauntering along slowly, and carefully examining the surroundings as he went.

The moon was coming up so there was light enough.

"If this man was only a common cowboy the marshal might be correct in his surmise that it would take three or four days to get his comrades started, but if he is one of the outlaw band—one of the Red Wolves of Wichita, as I suspect, it is certain that the rest of the gang will lose no time in coming to his assistance, and I think the chances are fully a hundred to one that the attempt to rescue him will be made to-night, despite the marshal's belief to the contrary, and so I will be on the watch, for if the Red Wolves do come I may be able to pick up some valuable information."

Having come to this determination the Lone Hand made a circuit around the calaboose so as to ascertain all the particulars in regard to the surroundings.

The building was situated near the upper end of the town, there being only three houses beyond, and in the rear of it extended the prairie.

"About as easy a place to get at as I ever saw," the Lone Hand remarked. "And if a party of rescuers succeeded in getting the prisoner out, and on the back of a horse, with that prairie so handy, all the men in Greerville, or in Greer county for that matter, could not prevent the man from getting off."

"It will not be a difficult job to capture the two men on guard, if the affair is worked rightly," the man-hunter mused. "And when they are secured the worst part of the work is over."

The Lone Hand slowly made his way back to the point from which he had started, making a complete circle.

"Now then for a hiding-place, so that I will be able to witness the proceedings," he muttered.

Directly across the way from the calaboose was a small corral which was almost in ruins, the house to which it was attached having burned to the ground.

Making a *detour* so as to enter the corral from the rear—this movement performed so that his proceedings would not be likely to attract the attention of any one passing by at the moment—the Lone Hand made a survey of the premises.

"This will do admirably!" he exclaimed. "With the aid of a blanket I will be able to make myself pretty comfortable here, and keep a close watch on all that goes on in the neighborhood of the calaboose."

So, having ascertained all the particulars he required, the man-hunter went to the hotel, got his supper, lounged awhile in the office, then went to the old Jew's and bought his cigars, receiving from him a report that nothing new had happened, returned to the hotel, smoked in the saloon, and chatted with the acquaintance he had made until after ten, then retired to his room under pretense of going to bed.

In his room the man-hunter remained until about eleven o'clock; then, rolling up his blanket, he left the apartment through the window; as it happened, the room was on the opposite side of the house to the one on which the moon shone, so that the shade cast by the building covered this operation.

Once safely outside the hotel the Lone Hand struck off over the prairie and made a wide sweep around until he came to the rear of the corral, which he approached with the stealthy tread of a red warrior crawling in upon his prey.

Thanks to these precautions he reached the corral and found concealment within it without attracting the attention of any one, although the streets were far from being deserted, for Greerville kept late hours.

The Lone Hand arranged his blanket in a corner of the corral, from which he could command a good view of the calaboose and then reclined upon the ground.

"There, I will be able to have a good view of everything that takes place to-night in the neighborhood of the jail," he remarked. "And, possibly, if I think it will pay me to do so, I may be able to take a hand in the proceedings."

By this time the moon had reached its height and was beginning to descend. It was three quarters full, so there was ample light, and the watcher was able to see all that happened in his neighborhood almost as well as though it had been day.

The two guards were on duty before the calaboose and, as watching was rather tiresome business to these Texan gentlemen, they had procured two arm-chairs from one of the neighboring saloons; seated in them by the door of the house, one on each side of the portal they were taking things quite comfortably.

Every man that passes made it a point to stop and chat for a moment with the guards, and two or three of the wayfarers pressed a drink upon them from their private flasks, an invitation which the sentinels did not refuse.

The Lone Hand noted this and a scornful smile curled his lips.

"If this precious pair take a few more drinks a nice condition they will be in by midnight to keep a vigilant watch!" he exclaimed.

Hardly had this observation left his lips when along came Whispering Ben, and he, too, stopped to have a word with the guards.

The Lone Hand glanced at his watch; it wanted only a few minutes to midnight.

The words of Whispering Ben came distinctly to his ears.

"Well, gentlemen, you have a weary time ahead of you, and you have my sympathy!" he exclaimed.

"Duty is duty, you know!" responded one of the guards, and his voice showed that he was well under the influence of liquor.

"That is true; no mistake about that; but it is rough on you, gentlemen," Whispering Ben remarked.

"Say!" he exclaimed, abruptly, as if a sudden idea had just occurred to him. "I have a flask of whisky here which I was going to carry home for a quiet drink. Maybe you would like it?"

The guards caught eagerly at the offer, and the flask was transferred to them, and then Whispering Ben went on his way.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN INVASION.

"LOOK a-hyer, Dave!" exclaimed the guard who had taken possession of the flask tendered by Whispering Ben, "this isn't going to be such a bad thing arter all, and I reckon we didn't make any mistake when we volunteered to keep watch."

"You jest bet we didn't," the other responded. "But I say, give me a pull at that bug-juice so I kin see if it is up to the mark; my throat is as dry as an ash-heap."

"Arter me is manners," the first guard declared, and then he took a drink from the flask, and when the draught was swallowed, he smacked his lips with great relish.

"Aha! that is the stuff!" he exclaimed. "Blamed if that ain't as good whisky as I have struck in a dog's age."

"Hand it over so I kin sample it, and don't be so durned long about it!" the second man remarked.

And then when he got the flask in his possession he took as long a pull at it as his companion had done.

"Wal, how is that? Don't you call it prime?" the first man asked, when the second removed the flask from his lips, and smacked them together fully as vigorously as the other had done.

"You bet it is!" he replied. "I don't hanker arter no better liquor than that. I reckon that it is good as I have run across for a month of Sundays!"

"I disremember ever drinking any better benzine than that since I struck this hyer State of Texas," the other observed, with an owl-like air of wisdom.

"I reckon you never did!"

Then the two drank from the flask again, and it did not take them long to drain the bottle.

"It is all clean gone!" remarked the first guard in a regretful tone.

"Is that so?" cried the other, his voice beginning to get thick and husky.

"Yes, sir; it is a sure enough fact, and I am mighty sorry for it, too."

Here the other indulged in a prodigious yawn.

"Hullo! you ain't gitting sleepy?" his partner cried.

"Blamed if I ain't!" the other responded. "You see, I didn't git much sleep last night, and as I have been in the saddle the better part of the day I am pretty well tuckered out."

"Go ahead and take a snooze; I will keep watch for you," the first man observed. "I reckon this hyer watching business is all a piece of blamed foolishness, anyhow," he added. "How in thunder is this cuss going to git out of the calaboose when he is locked in, and Black Jack Thompson is inside for to keep his eyes on him, too?"

"Ah, you are too much for me, pard, and I reckon that it is all durned foolishness, jist as you say," and again the man yawned, extending his mouth to its utmost width.

"Jist take a snooze if you feel like it. One is enuff for to keep guard, and I am as wide-awake as a night-hawk."

"Wal, I reckon I will, if it is all the same to you. I will take a nap and then you kin do the same, and as the hull town has gone to bed no one will know anything 'bout it."

"That is so; I reckon that thar isn't many people awake in the town, for thar ain't a soul in the street, and I am so durned sleepy that I can't keep my eyes open."

"Shet 'em up then, and I will wake you up when I feel like taking a snooze."

"All right!"

And then the man stretched himself out in his chair, leaned his head back against the wall of the jail and in a few minutes was sound asleep.

Every word of the conversation had come

distinctly to the ears of the Lone Hand, and a sarcastic smile curled his lips as he saw the guard thus complacently neglect his duty.

"That flask of liquor was probably drugged," he murmured. "The stranger is in league with the friends of the cowboy in the jail, and it will not be long before this other sentinel will be sound asleep, and then the road will be open for a party to rescue Gallagher; the sentinels being asleep, it will be an easy matter for a gang to approach the jail without danger of alarming the town."

That the Lone Hand had calculated shrewdly was soon apparent.

Within ten minutes from the time that the first sentinel sunk into slumber the second man began to nod.

He did not attempt to struggle against the slumber which was overcoming his senses, only yawned a half-a-dozen times in a manner which threatened to dislocate his jaws, then allowed his head to rest against the wall of the jail, and in a few minutes was sound asleep.

"There is no doubt that the flask of liquor was drugged," the Lone Hand murmured as he noted the total abandonment of the watch.

Fifteen or twenty minutes passed away and then Whispering Ben made his appearance.

He had evidently been concealed somewhere in the neighborhood, all ready to come forward when the sentinels sunk to sleep under the influence of the drugged liquor.

He sauntered carelessly up to the sleeping men, and spoke to them in an ordinary tone.

"Hullo, boys, how goes it?" he asked.

Neither of the pair answered.

"Oho!" exclaimed Whispering Ben, with a chuckle of satisfaction. "I reckon these two fellows are so sound asleep that it would take a cannon to wake them up. A mighty queer way this is to keep watch, but these Texas sharps have funny ways of doing business."

Then Whispering Ben went on up the street.

"Now he has gone to give warning to the friends of the cowboy that the coast is clear," the Lone Hand muttered, as Whispering Ben disappeared in the distance.

"The question now arises, how shall I act under these circumstances? Will it be wise for me to attempt to arouse the town, and so interfere with the attempt to rescue Gallagher, or shall I allow matters to go on just as if I had no knowledge of the affair?"

The man-hunter pondered over this problem for a few minutes.

"The chances are great that I will not be able to induce Gallagher to make a confession even if I succeed in keeping him in the jail. That he is one of the Red Wolves of Wichita I feel certain, and that the outlaw band will be instrumental in effecting his rescue is more than probable, but it is pretty sure that the cowboys of the neighborhood will be roused to aid in his escape; the outlaws will keep in the background and pull the wires."

"If I interfere, I shall, in all probability, have to do it single-handed, for there will hardly be time to raise the town, and if a big gang comes, and it is more than likely that there will be twenty or thirty in the party, I shall have my hands full; if there is a fight the lives of innocent men may be sacrificed, so, upon the whole, I think I had better remain quiet and allow matters to take their course."

"Gallagher will be of more use to me out of the jail than in it."

At this point the meditations of the Lone Hand were interrupted by a shrill whistle, the sound coming from the direction in which Whispering Ben had gone.

"Aha! that is intended for a signal evidently!" the man-hunter exclaimed. "The whistle is to show that the coast is clear."

The Lone Hand bent his ear to the ground; he was listening for the sound of horses' hoofs.

Soon his anticipations were rewarded, and in a few moments after the tramp of hoofs came to his ears, a large body of horsemen rode down the street and halted a hundred feet or so from the jail.

There were fully thirty in the party; cowboys, evidently, to judge from their dress, but each and every man wore a rude mask of some kind so their faces could not be seen.

After coming to a halt, five of the party dismounted and approached the jail; they had their revolvers out and the hammers were raised as though they meant business.

Two of the men placed themselves in front of the sleeping sentinels, and the other three approached the door upon which one of them knocked.

It was soon apparent that the jailer was also sound in slumber's chain for it was only after repeated knockings that he was roused.

If the sentinel's sleep had been natural they surely would have been alarmed by the noise, but as it was they slumbered on, the knocking having no effect whatever on them.

At last, from within the jail came the voice of Black Jack Thompson, the guardian of the calaboose.

"Hello! w'ot in blazes are you kicking up all that racket for? Who is it?"

The tone in which the man spoke plainly showed that he was only half awake.

"It's Bud McCracken, let me in!" one of the disguised men responded, giving a tolerably good imitation of the marshal's tone.

The jailer was still stupid with sleep, and not disposed to be critical; having no suspicions that anything was wrong he did not hesitate to comply with the command.

The moment the door was opened the masked men thrust the muzzles of their revolvers in the face of the jailer and the leader of the party cried in stern, determined accents:

"Throw up your hands!"

"Hello! w'ot in blazes does this mean?" cried the astonished guardian of the calaboose as he backed away from the portal, closely followed by the cowboys.

"We have just come to pay you a little call and at the same time save you from having any more trouble looking after this prisoner whom you have in the calaboose hyer. We will take charge of him."

"Wa-al, blame me if this ain't the queerest kind of a raffle!" the astonished Black Jack Thompson exclaimed.

"Yes, it is a regular surprise party, but these little things will happen every now and then. We are in a hurry, so trot out Gallagher! We reckon we can take as good care of him as you can, and he will be a durned sight better off, anyway."

"Gen'lmen, I ain't the kind of man to kick up a fuss when the odds are ag'in' me," the jailer remarked, with an air of great dignity.

"And since you have come for Gallagher, and got the deadwood on me in this hyer surprising way, thar ain't nothing for me to do but to let you have him."

"But I want you to understand, gen'lmen, that I am doing it under compulsion, and that if I had half a chance I would make the biggest kind of a fight, for that is the kind of a hair-pin I am!"

"Oh, yes, everybody who is acquainted with you knows that you are all wool and a yard wide!"

"And warranted to wash, gen'lmen, too, every time!"

And then the jailer, having relieved his mind by this declaration, unlocked the door of the inner room, and Reddy Gallagher made his appearance.

"These gen'lmen have come arter you, Gallagher, and as I ain't disposed to play the hog, I'm going to let you go with them," Black Jack Thompson announced.

"I am very much obliged to you, old man," the cowboy said. "And I hope that if you ever get into a hole like this, you will find some one to do as much for you."

"Oh, that is all right, and now that you are out you had better git afore the town gits onto you, or else thar will be the biggest kind of a fight."

The cowboys, with the prisoner, retreated as fast as possible, vanishing in the distance like so many ghosts.

The jailer closed the door of the calaboose, and all was quiet again.

The Lone Hand rose from his lair.

"Well, I think I know who led this gang tonight," he murmured. "But whether I will be able to make any use of the knowledge is a question; it is my impression that I can."

CHAPTER XXVI.

SANDY HEARS PLAIN TALK.

WHEN Greerville woke up next morning and discovered what had taken place great was the amazement of the town.

It was the old story over again; the cowboys and the citizens never got on well together.

The cowboys looked upon the settlers in the light of a lot of intruders, and the citizens regarded the ranchers as a set of lawless barbarians who ought to be driven afar off into the wilderness.

There were a few hot-heads who talked about getting up an "outfit" to pursue Gallagher, but the better sense of the community was opposed to any such proceeding.

As the marshal, Bud McCracken, tersely observed:

"Gen'lmen, it is all bosh to talk about anything of the kind. We might as well try to hunt for a needle in a bundle of hay. In the first place we don't know who the parties are who did the job, although the chances are big that the Triangle men had a hand in it, but we cannot prove it, and even if we could, I reckon any attempt to make them responsible would turn out to be a bigger job than this hyer town of Greerville could handle."

The words of the marshal had good, sound sense at the back of them, and finally the citizens came to the conclusion that it would not be possible for them to do anything about the matter.

As it happened, Sandy MacAlpine and his pard, Eddie Livingstone, came to Greerville that morning, and as their ranch was on the direct road to the Triangle estate, the pair was questioned as to whether they had heard any horsemen pass during the small hours of the morning.

Neither of the pards could give any information though.

Both were sound sleepers, and nothing had occurred to disturb them during the night.

As Sandy explained:

"A regiment might have ridden by without our knowledge. After a man has worked hard in the fields all day he is not likely to be awakened during the night by anything short of a thunderclap."

After discussing the matter with the group of citizens who had accosted them, the pards sauntered into the saloon of the Lone Star Hotel.

Old man Anderson was behind the bar, and he glanced at the pair in rather a surly manner as they entered.

The saloon was empty at the time; almost everybody in the town was on the street, engaged in discussing Gallagher's escape.

"Good-morning, Mr. Anderson; how do you find yourself this morning?" Sandy asked in his usual genial way.

"I reckon I am pretty well," the landlord answered, rather shortly.

"Give us a couple of glasses of ale," said MacAlpine, placing a dollar upon the bar. He had noticed the coldness in Anderson's manner, and he wondered what had got into the old man.

The ale was placed before the pards, and as the landlord pushed the change over to Sandy he remarked:

"How are you getting on, MacAlpine—making much money out of your ranch?"

"Well, no, I cannot say that I am at present," Sandy answered as he sipped his ale. "It is not to be expected at first, you know," he explained. "It takes time to get a ranch up so as to make money out of it."

"But we will get there all the same one of these days!" Eddie Livingstone declared.

"But while the grass grows, the horse starves," the landlord observed, grimly.

"Oh, it is not so bad as that!" Sandy exclaimed.

"Oh, no, not by a jugful!" his pard added, emphatically.

"Then you are making a living out of the ranch?"

"Yes, that is true."

"And a few dollars over; fully enough to swear by!" Livingstone declared; he had a strong belief that a man should always put the best possible face upon matters.

"Sandy, you are a man whom I have allers had a good opinion of," exclaimed the landlord, abruptly.

"I am glad to hear it," the young man replied, somewhat astonished by the declaration.

"I have always taken you to be a good, square man," the host added.

"Well, I have always done my best to deserve such a reputation," MacAlpine replied.

"Now, I am no fool, you know."

"Oh, no," Eddie Livingstone exclaimed. "No one who knows you would ever make the mistake of thinking you to be one."

The young man knew that his friend desired to stand well with the old man, and so he resorted to this bit of flattery.

"Why I made the remark is so that you will understand that I am up to snuff," the landlord continued. "I know what little game you are trying to play."

"Little game!" questioned Sandy MacAlpine, with an innocent air.

"Yes, I have not been asleep, you know, while the thing has been going on."

"I don't think I understand what you are driving at," the young man observed.

"Oh, yes you do!" the landlord retorted. "It is no use for you to attempt to pull the wool over my eyes. You have been after my gal, Maggie, ever since you struck the town."

"Oh, yes, that is perfectly true," Sandy exclaimed in the frankest manner possible. "I have not made any secret of it, you know, but have been fair and above-board. I think Maggie is the nicest girl I ever saw, and I should be delighted to marry her one of these days if she could make up her mind to have me."

"Now, see hyer, Sandy MacAlpine, I am going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle!" old man Anderson declared, shaking his right forefinger impressively at the young man.

"Fire away, I am all ready for it," Sandy replied.

"Now I have not got anything ag'in' you personally," the landlord declared.

"Well, I am glad to hear that."

"But I don't think that it is right for a man situated as you are to come arter my gal."

"I am not rich, I know, but I reckon that I will be able to give Maggie a comfortable home."

"Say, put yourself in my place," the old man remarked. "Suppose you had a gal like Maggie and there were two men arter her. One poor, and struggling to git along, and the other rich enough to buy half of Greerville; wouldn't you be apt to favor the second man rather than the first, s'posin' in all other respects both men were equal?"

"I reckon I know what you are driving at!" Sandy exclaimed, annoyed. "You are speaking of Alex Wallace, the Triangle ranchman. He is rich, or is thought to be, and you would

prefer him to me for a husband for your daughter."

"Yes, sir-ee! you bet I would!" the old man cried.

"Don't you think you ought to allow Maggie some say in the matter?" Sandy urged.

"No, I don't!" the old man responded, bluntly. "Girls are foolish sometimes and do not know what is best for them. You are not the man, Sandy MacAlpine, for my darter, and I tell you frankly that I will never consent to your gitting her, unless you should happen to make a big strike somewhar and then that would put a different face on the matter. I tell you, right out, that you ain't welcome hyer and I hope that in the future you will keep away!"

"That is all right. I will not trouble you again—not unless you change your mind about this thing; so-long!" Sandy exclaimed, proudly, and then the pards departed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A COQUETTISH MAIDEN.

"WELL, old man, you did not get much encouragement, did you?" Eddie Livingstone remarked, after the two had got out of the saloon.

"That is a fact, and no mistake," Sandy MacAlpine replied, ruefully.

"Mighty plain talk now, I tell you."

"Too durned plain to be agreeable."

"The old galoot put it right to you."

"You bet he did."

"He is evidently a Triangle man from 'Way-back!'"

"Oh, yes, I don't think there is any doubt that Alex Wallace is at the bottom of this affair," Sandy asserted.

"That is the way it looks to me."

"It is a funny thing about this rancher," Sandy MacAlpine remarked, thoughtfully.

"Only a little while ago it was said that he was in difficulties, and it was doubtful if he would be able to pull through, but now he seems to have plenty of money."

"He has struck some lucky speculation, I suppose," Eddie Livingstone observed. "That is the way things go down in this country, you know. This is the land of ups and downs. A man may be almost a beggar to-day, and then to-morrow strike a streak of luck and make a big stake."

"Well, I only wish I could strike something of that kind," Sandy replied, with a disconsolate shake of the head. "And unless I do, I fear I will have a hard time in getting Maggie."

"But see here, old fellow, I don't want to wound your feelings by saying anything against your lady-love, of course, but it seems to me that she isn't acting exactly as a girl ought to act. If she really does love you what difference does it make whether you are rich or poor—or, to put it more correctly, what difference does it make if there is another man after her who has a deal more money than you possess?" Eddie Livingstone remarked, with that practical good sense for which he was noted. "She ought to look at the man and not at his money."

"Yes, that is true, every word! There is no doubt about it," Sandy MacAlpine admitted. "But you must take into consideration the fact that the girl has not made up her mind as to which one of the men who are after her she likes the best. I must do her the credit of saying that she has not shown any decided partiality for any one of us, although I think that this rancher, Wallace, and I have a decided lead over the other."

"Yes, that is the general opinion."

"Now, then, the old people, Maggie's father and mother, are just crazy after money. I don't believe that there are two people anywhere in the world that think more of a dollar than they do."

"I believe you are right there," the other remarked. "They are own brother and sister to the man who skinned the flea for his hide and tallow."

"And, naturally, they think the girl is very foolish to waste a thought on me when she can get a man with so much money as this Alex Wallace."

"Of course! I have no doubt they would think she ought to be put in a lunatic asylum if she made up her mind to marry a poor man when she could get a rich one just as well."

"That is about the idea. Well, a girl's father and mother have influence over her, of course, and if they are continually talking to her about how much better it would be for her to take one man and give the cold shoulder to the other, it ought to produce an impression."

"That is correct," Eddie Livingstone admitted. "And it is a strong pull in favor of your rival."

"Yes; particularly when the girl doesn't seem to be able to make up her mind."

"But how long is it going to be before she does?" the other asked in his straight, come-to-the-point way.

"Oh, I don't know; you will have to give me some easier conundrum than that to answer."

"Well, of course, each man to his fancy; all men cannot be expected to conduct their love-affairs in exactly the same way, but I can tell

you what it is, Sandy MacAlpine, if I had a girl like this I would make her come to a decision in a reasonable time."

"Suppose she took offense at your urgency, and, on the spur of the moment, decided against you?"

"Then I would give her up promptly, of course, and go look for another one. There is a very old motto which is an extremely true one, and that is, 'there are as good fish in the sea as have ever been caught.'"

"Well, you are not in love, or you wouldn't talk that way!" MacAlpine declared.

"Oh, I have been, and that is the game I have always played," Eddie Livingstone replied. "I am not the kind of man to talk much about my private personal matters, even to chums like yourself, but there is a little girl in the East who will become Mrs. Eddie Livingstone, just as soon as I get a good home to offer her, and I reckon that time will soon come; and when I courted her there wasn't any monkey business about the matter, either. I told her that I liked her better than any girl whom I had ever met, but that I was so situated that I could not afford to get married right away, but if she was willing to pledge herself to me and wait a year, then I could bring her to a nice home."

"She was willing, I presume, and so the course of your true love ran smoothly," Sandy remarked.

"Yes; and if I were you, I should try to get your girl to say something definite. I should go and tell her just what her father said, and put the question right to her: Is that the way she looks at the matter? Is it the money or the man she prefers?"

"You are right!" Sandy MacAlpine cried, impulsively. "Your advice is good and I will follow it. I might as well know my fate now as at any time."

"That is my idea."

"By going around to the back door the chances are that I will be able to see Maggie."

"All right, I will wait for you here."

When Sandy MacAlpine once made up his mind he was a determined fellow, and having come to the conclusion that it was time he learned what chance he stood he sought the girl without delay.

When her household duties were not occupying her time it was Maggie Anderson's custom to sit at the back door of the hotel and read, and so occupied the young man found her.

He had been afraid that the mother might be close at hand, which would interfere with his having a confidential talk with the girl, but as it happened, she had gone out to pay a visit, so the coast was clear.

"Why, you are quite a stranger, Sandy!" the girl declared when MacAlpine made his appearance, receiving him with a beaming smile and a cordiality which made his heart beat high with hope.

Then she hurried into the house and got a chair for him.

"Sit down," she said. "I am glad you have come, for this book is a tiresome one and I would much rather talk than read."

"I came just in the nick of time then."

"Yes."

"I am glad of that," and he sat down by Maggie's side.

"What kind of a book is it that you are reading?"

"Oh, a real stupid love story, where the lovers quarrel and make up, quarrel and make up again just like so many children."

"When people love each other they ought not to quarrel."

"Oh, well, lovers are not angels, and being only mortals it is natural, I presume, that misunderstandings should occur, but it is tiresome to read about them—that is when the story is made up of nothing else."

"I should think so, yet to a great many people I suppose it is interesting. All the world loves a lover, you know."

"Does it? Well, I don't know."

"And speaking of love that reminds me that your father went for me awhile ago about paying attention to you."

"Oh, did he?" and the girl's face flushed a little.

"Yes, he said I was too poor a man and that you could do much better than to marry me."

"I wish father would mind his own business and allow me to attend to mine!" Maggie exclaimed, decidedly vexed.

"And, Maggie, since he spoke to me I have been turning the matter over in my mind and I came to the conclusion to speak to you about it. You know that I think the world of you and I should like to ascertain whether you agree with your father in the opinion that a poor man, like myself stands no chance to win you for a wife."

This was putting the question bluntly enough, and for a few moments the girl was confused.

She cast her eyes upon the ground and her face was covered with blushes.

"Forgive me for speaking so abruptly," Sandy MacAlpine continued. "But your father's words roused in me a desire to know my fate and so I have spoken."

"Sandy, I can assure you that I do not share my father's opinion in regard to you," Maggie

said slowly, raising her big blue eyes in which now shone a different light from what the young man had ever seen there.

"Of course, I am not a romantic girl," she continued. "I do not believe that a woman ought to marry a man because she thinks she loves him unless she is satisfied that he can take care of her in a proper manner, but that doesn't require a fortune, you know," and the faint smile which came over her face as she pronounced the words gave hope to the lover.

"Ah, Maggie, my darling, you give me new life!" MacAlpine exclaimed.

"Take care now!" she warned with uplifted finger. "Don't let your enthusiasm run away with you. I haven't admitted that I cared for you yet, you know. All I said was, that if I did care for you, the fact of your not being as rich as some of the other men in the town would not make any difference to me."

"Is not that about the same, Maggie, as admitting that you do care something for me?" he asked.

"Well, yes, I suppose it is, but don't build too much hope on that. I will tell you frankly, I have been a coquette so long that I don't know as I will ever be able to make up my mind to marry, for I cannot decide which of my admirers I like the best, and until I am certain on that point, of course, it is not possible for me to make a decision. Just now, when you are with me, I think I like you the best; when you are gone and another gentleman comes, I begin to think I have made a mistake, and that I like him as well as I do you."

"But some day something will happen to make you know the truth, and until that comes I am prepared to wait and hope," Sandy declared. "Good-by!"

He rose to depart, and offered his hand. Rising she clasped it; then, with a sudden impulse, he clasped her to his breast and kissed her lips.

"Oh, don't!" she murmured, but not in anger, and glided from his arms.

"Good-by!" again he said, laughing, and was gone, while Maggie ran into the house, her cheeks in a flame.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A NEW NEIGHBOR.

WHEN Sandy MacAlpine rejoined Eddie Livingstone, that gentleman was astonished at the change in his appearance.

MacAlpine came round the corner of the house with the air of a conqueror, his head was carried high in the air, there was a bright smile upon his face, and he trod like a man who owned every foot of ground upon which his feet trod.

"Hello, hello! This is a change!" Livingstone cried. "I reckon that you have not got the mitten as much as you might."

"No, sir; I am proud to say that if I have not been accepted I have not been discouraged by a refusal."

"Oho! Is that the best you can say?" the other asked, in amazement. "Why, I imagined from your manner that you had not only proposed and been accepted, but the wedding-day had been fixed."

"Oh, no; but Maggie spoke frankly—told me that she was not able to make up her mind, but if she did come to the conclusion that she liked me better than any one else, the fact that I was not a rich man would not have any weight with her."

"I see that you go on the motto, 'the smallest favors thankfully received.' Well, it is all right; if you are satisfied, no one else has a right to complain, but if I was in your place it strikes me that I would consider I had not got much pork for my shilling—not much satisfaction, you know."

And as Eddie Livingstone spoke he led the way to the corral where their horses had been put.

"Oh, well, we cannot all look at these matters in the same light," Sandy MacAlpine replied, his tone full of life and joy.

He could not explain to even his chum exactly how matters stood. He could not tell him that he had held the girl to his heart and pressed upon her ripe, red lips the seal of love, and although he had not asked the favor—had taken Maggie by surprise, yet he was satisfied that the kiss had not been all on his side, the pressure had been returned.

"What need has the tongue for speech, when the eyes can pray and the lips can preach?"

The pair mounted their horses and rode out of Greenville, taking the homeward trail.

"You are satisfied to keep right on, then?" Eddie Livingstone asked, marveling at the exultation displayed by his chum.

"Oh, yes, perfectly satisfied."

"By Jove! it is really astonishing how a pretty girl can twist a man around her finger sometimes," Eddie Livingstone commented. "Talking of chasing sunbeams, it isn't a circumstance to a man running after a woman."

"Oh, you are only envious because your girl is away off so that you can't get at her."

"Am I? And you are satisfied? Upon my

word, Sandy MacAlpine, I would not have believed it. I have always thought that the poet who wrote about a man living upon a woman's smile was a little cracked in the upper story, and ought to be in a lunatic asylum rather than at large, but you are a living illustration that the thing is not impossible. You will be making a hearty dinner out of snowballs next."

"Not so long as I remain in Greer county, and in the State of Texas!" MacAlpine declared, laughing.

"Well, that is true; but you would if you could, I will be bound."

And then the two hurried their steeds into a canter, and rode on at a brisk rate.

When the chums arrived at home they came upon a stranger, mounted upon a sorry-looking mustang, who had halted just beyond their sod house, and with a legal-looking paper in his hand, was looking around him in an inquiring way.

"I wonder what he is after?" Sandy MacAlpine remarked.

"Can't guess! He is a tenderfoot, by his looks."

Perceiving that the young men were dismounting, the horseman rode over to them.

"Good-day, gentlemen," he said in the most courteous manner. "I am in want of a little information, which you can probably give."

The chums returned the salutation, and Sandy MacAlpine said they would be happy to be of service, if they could.

"I want to find the homestead claim of John B. Brown."

"John B. Brown?" Sandy MacAlpine exclaimed, in a tone of question.

"He means Blower Brown," Eddie Livingstone explained. "John B.—B. for Blower, you know."

"Yes, I reckon Blower is John, come to think of it," MacAlpine remarked. "You see, stranger, people here have got so in the habit of calling him Blower Brown that the fact that he had another handle escaped me."

"Well, I am a stranger to Texas and to Texan ways, being from the North, but I have noticed since my sojourn in the State that when a man acquires a nick-name, he usually loses his rightful appellation, as seems to be the fact in this case."

"Yes, that is true," Livingstone replied.

"Did you say you wanted to find Brown's homestead claim?"

"Yes, that was the object of my visit here. If I mistake not you are Messrs. MacAlpine and Livingstone."

The young men nodded.

"Well, I am going to be a neighbor of yours, for I have bought Mr. Brown's estate, and he told me that it was the next farm above yours, but really, gentlemen, I do not see anything that at all answers to the description he gave."

The young men looked at each other and then a quiet smile appeared on their faces.

"The Brown place does join us, but what sort of claim did you expect to find?" Sandy MacAlpine asked.

"House, corral, corn-house, small barn, other small outbuildings, and one hundred and sixty acres of land all under fence."

Both the chums laughed outright as the stranger read this description from the paper which he held in his hand.

"Why do you laugh, gentlemen?" asked the stranger, in amazement.

"At this exhibition of Blower Brown's genius," MacAlpine replied.

"Yes, when you come to look for those improvements, particularly the fence, I reckon you will discover how it was that the old man's name was changed from John into Blower," Eddie Livingstone remarked.

"Great heavens!" cried the stranger, amazed; "gentlemen, you don't mean to say that these improvements exist only in Mr. Brown's imagination?"

"That is the actual fact," Sandy declared.

"He was only drawing on the future," Eddie Livingstone explained. "He described the place as he expected it would be some day when he got money enough to make the improvements."

"Why, this is an outrageous swindle!" the stranger declared. "And I wondered, too, gentlemen, that I could not see anything in the neighborhood that answered the description."

"The only improvement that Brown ever made was to dig a hole in the ground and cover it with a sod roof, but as he never took any care of it, preferring to bum around the town, it is all out of repair, and is not fit for a decent dog to live in, let alone a human," MacAlpine said.

"Upon my word, gentlemen, this beats anything that I ever heard of!" the horseman declared. "And I gave the rascal a hundred dollars above the mortgage, which I assumed."

"You are badly sold and no mistake!" Livingstone remarked. "For not only is the place without any improvements, but the land has never been broken up. But come in and have dinner with us, and after we eat we will show you over the place."

"Gentlemen, I shall be proud to accept the invitation in the same frank spirit in which it is tendered, and allow me to introduce myself.

My name is Nahan Bishop, and I am from the City of New York."

The young men said they were proud to make his acquaintance, and the three entered the house.

Dinner was soon served, and the party sat down; the fare was plain but wholesome, and all of them did full justice to it.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PARDS MAKE A PROMISE.

"WELL, gentlemen, I am pretty badly stuck, eh?" Nahan Bishop remarked, after the meal was finished and he had tendered the pards cigars from a well-filled cigar-case.

"Yes, I am sorry to say that you are," Sandy MacAlpine replied.

"Brown has been trying to get some one to take the place off his hands for nearly a year, but he couldn't give it away to anybody who knew anything about it," Eddie Livingstone explained.

"Yes, he would have been glad to have taken five dollars for it any time," Sandy MacAlpine added.

"Dear, dear! to think that there are such rascals in the world!" Nahan Bishop exclaimed, with a solemn shake of the head.

"If you had only inquired around Greerville in regard to Brown, almost any one would have told you that there was not the slightest reliance to be placed upon anything that he might say," Eddie Livingstone declared.

"Well, I suppose it was only stupid in me, but, gentlemen, I give you my word, I never thought of such a thing!" Nahan Bishop explained. "The man seemed to be so honest and straightforward, that I had no idea of questioning his integrity."

"You would have been a hundred in pocket if you had," Sandy MacAlpine remarked. "For the chances are ten to one that the first man you questioned about the matter would have told you that Blower Brown was as big a fraud as could be found in the town."

"Ah, well, I will know better next time. Thank Heaven! the loss of a hundred dollars is not so great a blow but what I can bear it with calmness," and the modest calmness with which Nahan Bishop delivered the speech made a decided impression upon the young men.

"And, now, gentlemen, since you have been so kind will you allow me to trespass upon your patience a little longer?" the ex-bunco man continued. "There are some other points upon which I desire information and as you both seem to be well-posted I do not doubt you can give it."

Of course the chums said they would be glad to oblige.

"Gentlemen, I suppose I must own up that I have not displayed much sharpness in this little real estate transaction, and I presume you will think that I am indulging in a slight boast if I declare that I am not such a fool as I look," Nahan Bishop remarked in his innocent, placid way.

"Oh, no," Sandy MacAlpine observed. "We know Blower Brown well enough. The fellow has an extremely plausible way with him, and it is no wonder that you were deceived."

"You are not the first man by a long shot who has fallen a victim to that humbug," Eddie Livingstone added.

"Well, I am glad to hear that," the other declared. "On the principle, you know, that misery loves company. I will frankly admit that the wily tongue and pleasant manner of Mr. Brown were too much for me, and I suppose you will hardly credit it, gentlemen, when I say to you that until I met this man of guileless ways, I had no idea of investing in any real estate down in this region."

Both of the chums expressed their surprise that he should have fallen into Mr. Brown's snare.

"He represented to me that it was a good investment, you know. I could easily rent the farm to some man who understood the business on shares and realize a good interest on my money."

"The old fraud!" Sandy MacAlpine declared. "He knew very well that no one would take the place unless they were paid for so doing."

"He followed the scriptural injunction—I was a stranger and he took me in," Nahan Bishop remarked. "My business in this section was of an entirely different nature from that of investing in real estate."

The pards nodded.

"I have been informed that this is the nearest town in the Wichita Mountain region—is that correct?"

"Yes," responded MacAlpine, rather surprised at the question.

"And that if a man desired to go to the Wichita Mountains that the town of Greerville would certainly be selected for a headquarters?"

"That is true enough," Eddie Livingstone assented. "Greerville is nearer to the Wichita Mountains than any other town by a good thirty miles."

"Now, gentlemen, what sort of a country is this Wichita Mountain region—wild and uninhabited, I presume."

"Yes, it is not visited except by hunters in search of game, or by some man run out of civilization who seeks to find a hiding-place there from the officers of the law," Sandy MacAlpine replied.

"Ah, yes, my information is correct then," the stranger remarked, rubbing his fat hands gleefully together. "It is just such a country as it has been represented to me to be."

"Now, gentlemen, I want to make a trip to the Wichita Mountains, is there any danger—any Indians?"

"No particular danger from the Indians, although it is so near the reservation that the bucks use it for a hunting-ground, and as there are some bad men among the reds, if they should happen to meet a stranger in the mountains and the opportunity seemed to be a favorable one, they might relieve him of his arms and valuables," Sandy MacAlpine said.

The under jaw of Nahan Bishop dropped, and he looked at the pards in a helpless way for a few minutes.

"Dear me, dear me!" he exclaimed at last, "this is not an encouraging prospect truly!"

"For my part I should not be as much afraid of the red bucks as of any white men that might be encountered up in the Wichita region," Eddie Livingstone declared.

"From the description of the country I presume that there are more outlaws than honest men to be found there," Nahan Bishop remarked.

"Oh, yes, any man that takes up his quarters in the Wichita region does so because his crimes have made civilized communities too hot to hold him," Sandy MacAlpine declared.

"It would not be safe then for a man like myself to venture up there?"

"I would not recommend you to do so," Sandy MacAlpine replied. "Apart from the danger of the proceeding, you would never be able to find your way through the hills without a guide. I have been there six or seven times on hunting excursions, and so know just what a rough bit of country it is."

"And I want to reach a particular spot there too," Nahan Bishop said, with a melancholy air of disappointment.

"If you are not acquainted with the country the chances are ten to one that you could not find it, especially as I take it that you are no woodsman," Eddie Livingstone observed.

"Bless your soul! I am from the city. I don't know anything about woods and wilds!"

"In that case then it would be risking your life to go up in the Wichita Mountains!" Sandy MacAlpine declared.

Nahan Bishop hesitated over the matter for a few moments, an air of deep perplexity upon his countenance.

"Dear me, dear me! I had no idea when I started on this quest that I was going to have so much trouble!" he remarked.

And then an idea seemed to come to him and his face brightened up considerably.

"Ah, I have it!" he cried. "Would it not be possible for me to employ guides?"

"Yes, no doubt that could be arranged," MacAlpine replied.

"They must be faithful, honest men, beyond the reach of temptation," Whispering Ben added. "Men who could be trusted with a large sum of money!"

The pards shook their heads and Nahan Bishop looked annoyed.

"How is it, gentlemen, are honest men so scarce in Greerville?"

"Oh, no, there are plenty of honest men in the town, but unfortunately for you they are not acquainted with the Wichita Mountain country," Sandy MacAlpine answered.

Nahan Bishop seemed to fall into a brown study for a few moments, then suddenly he raised his head and a beaming smile came over his broad face.

"Really, gentlemen, I believe I am losing what little wit I ever did possess!" he exclaimed. "Here I am bothering my head over this guide matter, going around, metaphorically, like Diogenes with a lantern, in search of an honest man, when the guides I want are right before me, I mean you two gentlemen, for did I not understand you to say that you were familiar with the Wichita region?"

"We have been in the mountains a half-a-dozen times, maybe, with hunting-parties, but, of course are not thoroughly posted in regard to all the nooks and corners of the hills like men who have explored them for years," Sandy MacAlpine answered.

"There is another point, too," Eddie Livingstone added, with a roguish smile. "How do you know that we are honest and can be trusted?"

"Ah, gentlemen, I am sure from your faces that you can be trusted!"

The pards laughed.

"Better not build too much on that!" Sandy MacAlpine warned. "Remember your experience with Blower Brown, and be careful."

"Yes, we Texans are awful deceptive cusses!" Eddie Livingstone added.

Nahan Bishop made a grimace.

"No more of the Blower Brown business, gentlemen, if you please. I suppose that after

my sad experience with that worthy I ought not to set myself up for a judge of character."

Again the pards laughed.

"But I am going to risk you two in spite of my adventure with Blower Brown," Whispering Ben declared.

"I am going to make a proposition to you, gentlemen," he continued. "I am going to offer you a chance to go into a scheme in which there is a deal of money, but I must ask that you will pledge yourselves to keep the matter a profound secret from everyone, even if you do not care to go into the affair after it is explained to you."

The pards looked at each other.

The opinion they had formed in regard to the stranger was not a particularly favorable one, that is, in regard to his visit and sharpness. He impressed them as being a good-natured man, who might get along well enough in the city but was decidedly out of place amid the rude scenes of the frontier and totally unfitted to cope with the knaves and sharpers, adventurers of every grade, who are to be found on the skirmish line of civilization.

They did not believe that the secret in regard to which the man was so particular amounted to anything; he had been made a dupe of by somebody, for that any secret with much money in it, could be connected with the Wichita Mountain region they did not believe.

Still, as far as they could see, there was no harm in giving the required promise.

Each saw this written on the eyes of the other, and Sandy MacAlpine acting as spokesman, said:

"Oh, that is all right! If you choose to intrust any secret to us, we will try and do our best not to betray your confidence."

"But if there is much money in the affair—say, two or three hundred thousand dollars, I wouldn't advise you to trust us with the particulars," the irrepressible Eddie Livingstone added, unable to resist the temptation to poke a little bit of fun at the stranger. "For although my pard and myself expect to make our eternal fortunes out of these quarter sections which we have secured, yet that is in the future and we might not be able to resist a big temptation if it was put in our way."

"Ah, I see that you love a jest," Whispering Ben remarked, smiling, pleasantly. "I appreciate the joke, and I can assure you that I am not at all afraid to trust my secret to your care."

"We give you our word that we will keep it soundly," Sandy MacAlpine replied in his straightforward, honest way.

"Well, gentlemen, it is a strange sort of a story that I am about to tell you," Whispering Ben began.

"A kind of a ghost story, a fairy tale, I suppose!" Eddie Livingstone exclaimed, with a grin.

"Oh, no, it isn't fiction, it is true," the other answered, apparently so innocent of slang as not to comprehend the sarcasm of the speech.

"Keep quiet, Eddie, and let Mr. Bishop go ahead!" Sandy MacAlpine remarked.

"It is truly a marvelous tale, gentlemen, and bears out the truth of the old assertion that truth is stranger than fiction," Whispering Ben declared in an extremely solemn way.

"Maybe that is so, but we have some champion liars in Texas who can be backed to knock out truth, every time!" Eddie Livingstone declared.

"This is no fiction! Listen, gentlemen, and judge for yourself."

CHAPTER XXX.

A "FAIRY" STORY.

"As I informed you, gentlemen, my name is Bishop, Nahan Bishop, and I am the proprietor of a large and flourishing school for boys located in Tarrytown, in the State of New York, and if you are acquainted with the great metropolis of America, New York City, and its neighborhood, you understand that my town is only a few miles from the great city of the Empire State."

This speech was delivered with all the flourish of the pedagogue, and the young men were so thoroughly deceived by this accomplished scoundrel that they had no suspicion that he was anything but what he assumed to be.

"I have conducted my school, gentlemen, assisted by a score of competent teachers, whose superiors are not to be found in the country from Maine to California, for the last thirty years, and I am proud to say that, besides establishing a reputation for my institution equal to that enjoyed by any similar one in the country, I have acquired a fair share of this world's goods."

"Both my pard and myself are well-acquainted with New York and its neighborhood," Sandy MacAlpine remarked.

"Indeed! Well, gentlemen, I am proud to meet you," and in his enthusiasm Nahan Bishop shook hands with the two young men.

"But to return to my tale. A couple of months ago wearied with the cares of years I determined to take a vacation and rest my tired brain by traveling. I had never visited the West and so I planned an extensive tour.

"In the course of my travels I came to Kan-

sas City, that wonderful young metropolis of the newer West.

"When I arrived in the city a celebration was going on and the hotels were so crowded that the only accommodations I was able to find were at a fourth-rate house on a side street. I did not like my quarters, nor the character of the guests, most of whom seemed, to use the common saying, to be decidedly off color.

I was not particularly alarmed for my personal safety, you understand, for I have always acted on the rule when you are in Rome do as the Romans do, and when I travel I never attract attention by wearing expensive clothes, but always garb myself plainly.

"Then too I never carry much money with me, always making arrangements before I start so as to have remittances reach me at certain points.

At this hotel I had a miserable room away up at the top of the house and what I disliked most about the apartment was the fact that a door led from it into an adjoining room, and upon the door was only a common lock, no bolt; still as the door was locked, I presumed that there would not be much danger of anybody intruding upon me; and the room was Hobson's choice, gentlemen, it was that or none.

"As it happened, on the first night that I stopped at this hotel I was out late. I attended the theater and did not get home until after eleven, and I sat down in my room to enjoy a cigar for a few minutes before going to bed.

"As I sat there smoking I heard my neighbor in the next room come in, and from his heavy uncertain tread I gathered the idea that the man had been drinking.

"He stamped about for a few minutes and then he came and tried the door between the rooms.

"Aha, my fine fellow!" said I to myself, 'that is no go; you will not get in here.' And then, would you have suspected such a thing, gentlemen? The fellow, finding that the door was locked, coolly put his shoulder against it, and burst it open with almost as little trouble as though it had been made of pasteboard instead of wood!"

"That was a startling surprise!" Sandy MacAlpine remarked, as the other hesitated.

"Yes, a surprise party that you did not expect!" Eddie Livingstone added.

"Gentlemen, I assure you that you could have knocked me down with a feather, as the big, ugly brute of a man came reeling into my room—a huge, red-faced ruffian, with a fierce black beard, who looked for all the world like one of the pirates of the olden time that we read about."

"By Jove! Mr. Bishop, your story is as good as a novel!" Sandy MacAlpine declared.

"Wait, my dear sir, until you hear the whole of it, and then you will see how true in this case is the statement that truth is stranger than fiction!" the other remarked, in his impressive way, with a dignified wave of the hand.

"I was fairly rooted to my seat, for I expected nothing less than to be murdered on the spot, but the intruder had no idea of offering violence to me, as I soon discovered," Whispering Ben continued. "No, in the most friendly manner possible, he cried: 'Hello, old top! I reckoned somebody was on the other side of the door, and so I bust'd it in! Have a drink?' Then, without asking leave or license, he took a chair, sat on the other side of the table, pulled a big flask from his pocket, and passed it over to me. 'Take a good big drink of this 'ar' liquid lightning, and warm the cockles of yer heart!' he cried. Gentlemen, the man inspired me with so much terror that I did not dare to refuse, and I think the liquor I took was, without exception, the vilest stuff I ever tasted!" and the speaker made a terrible face, as though the flavor of the draught still lingered on his palate.

"I reckon you have not sampled much Greer county whisky since you have arrived in these parts," Eddie Livingstone remarked, with a sly wink.

"Well, gentlemen, that is the truth," Nahan Bishop admitted. "I rarely indulge in liquor except to use it for medicine."

"That is what about one-half of these Texans declare," Sandy MacAlpine remarked, with a smile. "But they usually add to the declaration the remark that this is an awful sickly country."

"Yes, yes, I see the joke. Well, gentlemen, after I had taken the drink the big stranger became exceedingly friendly. 'Wot is the use of that durned door being shet?' he asked—I am reproducing his peculiar dialect for you to the best of my ability, gentlemen. 'If that 'ar' door is open we kin be neighborly and social-like. I hate to be alone; I dunno how it is with you, stranger, but when I am alone I have all sorts of queer fancies, and when I close my eyes see all sorts of queer things. Take another drink!' The man was so much under the influence of liquor that I feared if I angered him by a refusal he might get ugly, so I took another swallow of the nasty, fiery stuff, which burnt my throat all the way down. Lucky I was able to avoid taking much of the liquor, for as I drank directly from the flask, he was not able to see

how much I took, but as it was, in my confusion I neglected to pretend to take a bigger drink than I really swallowed, and the man was not so drunk as not to notice it, and he at once complained.

"That is no way to h'ist yer lick!" he exclaimed. 'You don't take enuff to wash the cockles out of your throat! Look at the kind of a drink I take!' And then, gentlemen, upon my word of honor, I believe the fellow swallowed a whole tumblerful at a draught.

"Then he pushed the bottle over to me, and I was careful to take plenty of time about the drinking operation on this occasion, so that the man was satisfied.

"Say, do you know that you look something like a preacher," he exclaimed abruptly, after looking me all over for a while.

"I replied that I was a school-teacher.

"Well, preacher or school-teacher, both on 'em are pretty much alike," he replied, beginning to speak now in a disappointed, peculiar way. 'School-teacher, do you ever see things at night in the dark, arter you git to bed?'

"The question astonished me and when I took a cautious peep at the man before replying I saw that his eyes were rolling wildly, so I thought best to humor him and answered that I guessed I did, sometimes."

"Leetle devils that dance all over the bed and come and pull the clothes down when you cover yer head up with them and grin in yer face!" he exclaimed, wildly; then he gave a sudden leap in the air. 'Thar they are now—arter me ag'in!' he cried!"

"I see, The-Man-with-the-poker," Sandy MacAlpine remarked.

"Yes, sir, delirium tremens, and a frightful attack he had. He roused the whole house and the joke of the thing was that I was the only man who could do anything with him, and so I had to take care of the unfortunate wretch, for as a Christian man I couldn't leave him to suffer."

"After the attack was over he became as weak as a child, doctors were called and they gave their opinion that the fellow was not long for this world. I watched by him for two days, hardly allowing myself time to take food and rest.

"On the night of the second day as I was keeping my vigil by his couch—it was after midnight and everything was still—the man opened his eyes suddenly and looked up in my face, and for the first time since his attack I saw the light of reason shining in them.

"How long hev I laid on my back?" he asked in a hoarse whisper, not able to speak loud so weak was he.

"Two days," I answered.

"Have the doctor sharps been to see me?"

"I nodded assent.

"An' wot do they say—how soon will I cash in my checks?"

"Now, gentlemen, I hold that it is not right to deceive a dying man and delude him with false hopes, so I repeated to him what the doctors had said.

"Them sharps know their leetle biz," he muttered. 'I kin feel that I am going—school-teacher, I won't never see the sun ag'in.'

"Oh, you may last longer than that," I answered.

"No, pard, I don't b'lieve I hev got ten minutes of life left. I'm sick of the game and I am willing to quit, although thar's a fortune for me in Texas in the Wichita Mountains if I could only git down thar."

"Then he told me his story briefly, for his life-current was ebbing fast. He had been a desperado and an outlaw for years, and six months before this time had been connected with a gang here in Texas, and in a certain spot in the Wichita Mountains the gang had accumulated over thirty thousand dollars, and were just about to divide it when they were surprised by a band of Texan Rangers, and the ruffian believed that he was the only man of the gang that escaped death, the rest being all killed in the fight, so that he alone knew the secret of the treasure, and that secret he confided to me. He had a rude map of the region, and assured me that I would not have any difficulty in finding the place.

"At first I hesitated to accept, but he pressed the map upon me, with the assurance that I was the only man who had done him a good turn in years, and as he had neither kith nor kin in the world, I ought to be his heir."

"Under such circumstances I should have taken it!" Sandy MacAlpine exclaimed, deeply interested in the story.

"You can just bet I would have jumped at it!" Eddie Livingstone assented. "I tell you, such a sum as thirty thousand dollars is not to be found on every bush!"

"Nor in every hotel, even in such a wonderful town as Kansas City," added Mr. Bishop, with a smile.

"Well, gentlemen, to bring my story to a close, I accepted the legacy, and, five minutes after I had put the map safely away in my pocket, the man was dead.

"My story is told. Of course, gentlemen, you understand that I came down here as soon as possible. The only thing that bothers me is the doubt as to whether I have really the right to

take this vast sum of money, the product of a long series of daring robberies, the most of which I believe were perpetrated on Mexican soil, for there the band operated until driven over the line by the Mexican soldiers, who on this side of the Rio Grande got the United States authorities to pursue the robbers, and so it happened that they came away up in this country."

"Well, that is a delicate question which each man must settle for himself," Sandy MacAlpine observed, thoughtfully. "But it seems to me that, under the circumstances, any man would be justified in possessing himself of this treasure."

"Most certainly!" Eddie Livingstone declared. "If it was known from whom this money came—if a man, after he got possession of it, could say, so much honestly belongs to this man, and so much to this other fellow, why, it would be a different matter."

"That is exactly the decision I arrived at, and I came to it by the same line of reasoning," the stranger declared. "I had some scruples in the beginning, I will admit, particularly as I am not in urgent need of the money, being pretty well situated as far as this world's goods are concerned, and as I am so circumstanced is the reason why I am going to make you an offer. How would you two gentlemen like to go in with me in this enterprise? I cannot very well go alone, for I must have aid, and as I am satisfied from your looks that you are honest, upright men, I should like to make an arrangement with you."

CHAPTER XXXI. THE EXPEDITION.

THE mild and genial Mr. Bishop smiled in his benevolent way on the two young men as he made the proposition, for which the pair were utterly unprepared.

The pards looked at each other in a doubtful sort of way; this stroke of fortune was so unexpected that they could hardly bring themselves to believe that there was not some mistake about the matter.

Perceiving their hesitation the gentleman said:

"Take plenty of time, my dear friends, to consider the matter. A day more or less will not make any difference to me; I am not in any hurry. As the treasure has remained there so long, there is no danger that the delay of a few days now will make any difference."

"Well, I don't know about that," Sandy MacAlpine replied. "I think that if I were you I should want to get my hands on it as soon as possible, for fear that somebody else might stumble upon it."

"Yes, that is my idea, too," Eddie Livingstone declared. "I should go for it as quickly as I could make arrangements so to do."

"Well, gentlemen, I don't know but what your ideas are correct. Of course, you are young and full of energy, while I am in the sere and yellow leaf, so to speak, and that is the reason why I am anxious to get you to assist me in this enterprise. If I have your aid I have no doubt that the thing will be a success. It would be useless for me to attempt to go alone; such a course of action is not to be thought of, and if I procure guides I may possibly get men who are not to be trusted, and after the treasure is found I may be robbed and perhaps murdered. I am just as fond of money, gentlemen, as the average man, but I am not prepared to run any dangerous risks in getting hold of it."

"What you say in regard to the danger of the guides turning out to be untrustworthy, is very true," Sandy MacAlpine remarked. "The temptation would be so great that even a man of average honesty might yield to it."

"Yes, thirty thousand dollars is a big sum, and there are plenty of men in this section who would be willing to commit almost any crime for a hundredth part of the sum," Eddie Livingstone observed.

"Yes, yes, I know that," the stranger answered, with a grave shake of the head. "This is the country of lawless men, and until I encountered you two gentlemen I have not seen any one to whom I dared to explain the errand which brought me to Texas."

The pards acknowledged the compliment with a bow.

"Now, gentlemen, I am prepared to make the most liberal arrangement with you," Bishop continued. "As I explained, I am not in need of the money, so I can afford to be generous. If you will go with me I will give you one-third of the treasure."

Again the pards looked at each other and their faces became grave.

"I have no doubt whatever that the man stated the truth when he said the money-chest of the outlaws contained upward of thirty thousand dollars," the gentleman declared. "He was on his death-bed, knew that his minutes were numbered, and had no reason for telling a falsehood."

"That is true," Sandy MacAlpine admitted. "The only doubt that I have about the matter, is that it seems to be too good to be true."

"Yes, that is the way it strikes me," Eddie Livingstone remarked.

"Well, gentlemen, there is a chance, of course, that the man's story was not true, and that no such treasure exists as he described, but if ever a man seemed to be speaking the truth, he certainly did," the other asserted. "And, under the circumstances, I cannot think of any reason why he should wish to tell a falsehood about the matter. Most certainly he could not gain anything by resorting to deception."

"You are right there, and if the man did deceive you, it was merely a piece of willful rascality."

"Yes, yes, no doubt, but I am satisfied that he spoke the truth!" Bishop declared. "The treasure exists, and if you join me, we three can get it. What do you say?"

"Oh, we will go in with you and glad of the chance, eh, Eddie?" Sandy MacAlpine declared.

"You bet!" Livingstone exclaimed, emphatically. "We are just the men to be counted in when thirty thousand dollars is lying around loose wanting to be gathered in."

"Well, gentlemen, I assure you that I am very glad indeed that you can see your way clear to accept my offer," Bishop remarked. "Now, how soon can we start? To my thinking, the quicker we go the better, for I will admit that I am anxious to discover whether the treasure really exists or I have come all this distance on a wild-goose chase!"

"We could get away to-morrow morning easily enough, for there is no particular preparations to be made," Sandy MacAlpine replied.

"And how long will it take us to reach the spot?" Bishop asked.

"Well, that depends upon what part of the Wichita Mountain region we seek. It is a pretty big country, you know," MacAlpine answered.

"True, I had forgotten that I have not shown you the map."

Then from an inside breast-pocket he drew a paper carefully wrapped up in oiled silk.

This when opened revealed a rude map, but the maker of the diagram had drawn it so accurately that both of the young men immediately recognized the spot.

"That is not far off!" Sandy MacAlpine exclaimed. "I know it well; it is the Southwest Pass. I and my pard here have been through that defile a dozen times."

"Yes, by the Southwest Pass we go to our hunting-grounds, but you can bet your life that if we had any suspicion there was any thirty thousand dollars in that Pass, we would have hunted for it."

"I do not think you would have found the treasure, for it is very cunningly concealed," Bishop remarked. "And so careful was the ruffian from whom I obtained my information, that he did not designate on his map the exact spot where the money is hidden, but described it to me by word of mouth."

"If we start early in the morning, we can easily reach the place in a few hours," Sandy MacAlpine remarked. "We will not have to make any particular preparations except to carry along some eatables, and see that our weapons are in good order, although there is not much danger that we will be called upon to use them, but it is always as well to be prepared."

"Certainly; you are quite right about that," Bishop exclaimed. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. And, by the way, as long as we are going to start in the morning, will it not be a good idea for me to take up my quarters here with you until then, so as to be all ready for an early start?"

The pards thought that was a good idea, and so the matter was arranged.

Never did the hours seem to pass more slowly away than the ones which intervened between the afternoon and bedtime to the young men.

Sandy MacAlpine was particularly impatient, and he brooded over the matter so deeply that it was after midnight before he fell asleep.

Five thousand dollars would be his share, if the quest was successful, and that sum would make him independent—would surely give him the girl he loved, the peerless Maggie Anderson.

But, as he observed, it seemed to be too good to be true; however he consoled himself with the thought that a few hours would tell the tale, and at last fell asleep.

The pards were up with the dawn, prepared breakfast, then woke their guest, who slept as sleeps the just, troubled by no cankering care.

The meal was eaten, and then the three mounted their horses and set out, pushing onward at a good pace over the rolling prairie until the rude outlines of the Wichita Mountains loomed up before them.

Through the Southwest Pass they rode until they came to about the middle of the defile where it widened out into a small valley.

"This is the spot!" Bishop exclaimed, as he halted his steed. "Midway of the valley there should be a clump of pines, three trees growing in front of a large bowlder."

"There they are!" cried Sandy MacAlpine, his nerves beginning to tingle with excitement.

"Yes, yes, it exactly answers the description!" Bishop declared. "That bowlder is what is known as a rocking stone, although no one would imagine it was one to look at it, for

it seems to be firmly seated on its base, but when a lever is inserted under it at a particular place the stone can be moved about a foot, and under the stone is a cavity where the treasure is concealed."

"I say, Eddie, think how near a man can be to a fortune and not know it," Sandy MacAlpine observed.

"Yes, that is true enough," the other returned.

"My partner and myself have sat in the shade of that clump of pines, and rested our backs against the bowlder, a half a dozen times, for it was a favorite sport for us to halt and take a bite of something to eat," Sandy MacAlpine explained.

"And you never suspected that thirty thousand dollars was right at your elbow, waiting to be picked up," Bishop observed with a chuckle.

"Of course not! We are not prophets, nor the sons of prophets, and we would have to be to enable us to make such a guess as that," the young man replied.

"You can just bet though that we would have gone for that stone in an extremely lively manner if we had had a suspicion of the truth!" Eddie Livingstone declared.

"Ah, thus it often is in this life, we walk blindly on, unconscious that an opportunity to grasp a fortune is right before us," Bishop observed, with a grave shake of the head. "Man is but as a blind mole, yet in his vaingloriousness he prides himself upon his wisdom and his foresight."

"But come, let us to action and secure this treasure. I do not doubt, my young friends, that your mouths are watering for a sight of the lucre."

"Yes, I reckon we are tolerably anxious," Sandy MacAlpine admitted.

"Anxious! I am on pins and needles!" Eddie Livingstone exclaimed.

"Let us on, then, and possess ourselves of this hidden wealth which, though accumulated by lawless men, we will use wisely and well," Bishop said.

The three rode up to the clump of pine and dismounted; they took the precaution to tether their horses so as to prevent the beasts from wandering away while they were occupied in the search, then approached the rocking stone.

Sandy MacAlpine cut down a stout young sapling with his bowie-knife and trimmed it so as to serve for a lever, then, acting by Bishop's directions, he inserted the end of the stick under a particular portion of the rock; putting his weight upon the end of the lever, MacAlpine slowly rolled the stone to one side, disclosing a small cavity in the flat stone upon which the bowlder rested, but there was naught in the hole but the remains of some buckskin bags, which had evidently once contained coin.

The adventurers looked at each other with blank faces.

They had evidently been forestalled.

Some one had possessed themselves of the treasure, either through a knowledge of the secret or accidentally making the discovery that the bowlder was a rocking stone.

"Upon my word, gentlemen, this is too bad!" Bishop exclaimed. "I never was so disappointed in all my life!"

Hardly had the words left his lips, when sounds broke upon the air, which filled the souls of the adventurers with horror.

A chorus of demoniac-like Indian yells rung out like the knell of doom, and then the shouts were followed by the sharp report of firearms.

The three immediately understood what it meant.

Their presence in the mountains had been detected by some wandering band of red-skins, and the braves had determined upon taking their scalps.

Although the Indians were supposed to be confined to their reservations, yet small parties would occasionally steal away, and when a party of bad bucks encountered white-skins in the mountains, once in awhile the red war fever mounted to their brains, and they did not hesitate to attack the pale-faces, particularly if they felt pretty sure that they would be able to wipe them out, and there was not much danger of the crime being traced home to them.

The adventurers started for their horses, but before three steps had been taken, Sandy MacAlpine slipped and fell.

Eddie Livingstone, who was just behind, stopped to help him up.

"It is no use, Eddie!" Sandy MacAlpine gasped. "I am done for. Save yourself; tell Maggie that my last thought was of her! Good-by!" And then, with a groan, the young man sunk back, life having apparently fled.

With an exclamation of despair, Livingstone hurried on.

Bishop was in the saddle, and had unfastened Livingstone's horse, retaining his presence of mind wonderfully under the circumstances.

"We must ride for our lives!" he cried.

Eddie Livingstone understood this well enough, and was soon in the saddle.

Away the two dashed, followed by the yells

and shots of the savages, but it was soon manifest that the Indians were on foot; the fugitives had an important advantage, and they succeeded in escaping from their howling enemies, but not until they were well out of the Wichita Mountains, did they dare to breathe their horses.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GREERVILLE HEARS THE NEWS.

THERE was little conversation between the two men until the town of Greerville appeared in the distance, then Bishop broke the long silence by saying:

"Upon my word, I do not remember anything that ever occurred to me during my life that has been as painful to me as this unfortunate affair."

"Yes, it is a terribly heavy blow to me," Eddie Livingstone responded. "MacAlpine was one of the best parads that ever a man had, and to think that he should be cut down in this untimely way, right in his prime by these bloodthirsty savages is perfectly awful."

"Ah, and it is a sad thought to me too, that I am, in a measure responsible for it!" Bishop declared with a doleful shake of the head. "For if I had not induced you and your friend to go upon this expedition the accident would not have happened."

"It is not your fault; you acted for the best," Eddie Livingstone replied.

"Yes, that is true, and, of course, I had no suspicion that there was any danger. It was an event that could not be foreseen, and, really when you come to reflect upon the circumstance it was a mercy that both you and I were not killed, as well as your unfortunate friend," Bishop observed.

"We had a narrow shave for our lives, that is a fact."

"It makes me shudder when I look back and reflect upon our narrow escape. It was a miracle that we managed to get off. But what on earth do you suppose put it into the heads of the red warriors to attack us?"

"Sheer devilry—nothing else!"

"And not the slightest warning was given either."

"That is the way that these red butchers do business," Eddie Livingstone replied. "It is always their game not to give their men whom they attack any chance for their lives."

"It is really too dreadful!" Bishop declared. "But what do you propose doing now?"

"Go to Greerville and raise a force of men so as to hunt these red butchers down!" Eddie Livingstone replied with fierce energy.

"Yes, yes, that ought to be done, of course, and no doubt if the men start promptly they will be able to overtake and punish these miserable murderers."

"Well, I don't know about that," the other remarked, with a doubtful shake of the head. "There's a good deal of room in the Wichita Mountains, and one of these wandering bands of red-skins get over a good deal of ground in a day; and then, too, they have the advantage of being thoroughly acquainted with the region, so that it is not an easy matter to overtake them if they get a good start."

"But we can make the trial, and that will be some satisfaction," Bishop observed. "We can do all in our power to punish the red-handed scoundrels."

"Yes, but the chances are against us," Eddie Livingstone replied, with a sigh.

"I presume so, and it is a terrible thought, too, that these miserable scoundrels will be able to escape punishment," Bishop declared. And then, as if a sudden thought had occurred to him, he continued:

"And to think that your poor friend came to his death on a fruitless quest; but, of course, we could not tell that in advance. My information in regard to the treasure was evidently correct enough, but, unfortunately, we were not the first in the field; some one got ahead of us."

"Yes, we were too late."

"By the way, do you think that it is necessary for us to tell the people in the town all the particulars of the affair?" Bishop asked, slowly. "I mean in regard to what took us into the Wichita Mountains? I don't know how you feel about the affair, but for my part, I am so disgusted at our failure that I would prefer not to have people know that we went on a wild-goose chase, and all that we had was our labor for our pains."

"No, I do not think that it is necessary to go into particulars," Eddie Livingstone replied.

"We can say that we were on a hunting expedition—that is the truth, you know," the other suggested.

"Yes; and as long as we did not succeed in our search it is as well to keep the matter quiet."

Undoubtedly we would be the laughing stock of the town if the affair gets out," Bishop said. "It is bad enough to fail without having everybody know about the matter. The jokers of the town would have no end of fun at our expense."

"It is just as well to keep our search for the treasure in the background, for it is no one's business."

So, acting on this determination, when the pair arrived in Greerville and told the story of the tragedy they did not speak of the treasure-hunt which had taken them into the Wichita Mountains.

The news created the greatest excitement. It had been some time since there had been any trouble with the Indians, although during the time when the settlers first came into Greerville county there had been quite a number of fights between the whites and wandering bands of red-men, who had stolen away from their reservations.

It was immediately suggested that a meeting be called at the hotel to deliberate upon what ought to be done.

Word was passed around town and the citizens began to flock to old Pop Anderson's hostelry whither Eddie Livingstone and Bishop had gone.

When the pair entered the hotel, Maggie greeted Eddie Livingstone in her usual light-hearted way, and immediately inquired for Sandy MacAlpine.

"Where is your bosom friend, Sandy?" she asked. "It seems odd to see one of you without the other."

The face of the young man darkened; he had come fully prepared to tell the young girl all the particulars of the tragedy, and relate how Sandy MacAlpine's last thoughts had been of her, but now that he was face to face with the girl he shrunk from the task.

The shadow upon Eddie Livingstone's face was soon perceived by Maggie, and her quick wits told her that something was wrong.

"What is the matter?" she exclaimed. "Why do you look at me in such a strange way, Eddie? Has—has anything happened to Sandy?"

"Well, I—I—," and the young man broke down.

"For Heaven's sake, speak, Eddie, don't keep me in suspense!" the girl cried. "Something has happened to Sandy—I know it! Oh, what is the matter?"

"My dear young lady you must prepare yourself for a terrible blow," Bishop remarked.

"Oh, Eddie, speak to me—tell me what has happened!" the girl wailed. "I am strong, I can bear it! I can bear everything but this suspense!"

"Maggie, you will never see poor Sandy again," the young man remarked, finding the use of his tongue at last.

"He is dead!" she cried.

"Yes, killed by the Indians in the Wichita Mountains, and his last words were of you; we were fired on by the Indians from an ambush; Sandy was hit and fell as we were running for our horses. I stopped to pick him up, but he told me to go on and save myself, as he was mortally wounded. 'Tell Maggie,' he said, 'that my last thoughts were of her; and then he fell back dead.'"

"Oh, merciful heavens! I shall go mad!" the girl cried. "My brain seems to be bursting! I am all on fire!"

Then she gave utterance to a piercing shriek and fainted dead away.

Her mother and father hastened to her assistance and carried the girl away.

"Poor thing! she takes it dreadful hard. I reckon she must have loved Sandy after all," Livingstone remarked.

By this time the crowd began to gather, and as it was soon apparent that the saloon would not be big enough to hold them all an adjournment was had to the open air.

Eddie Livingstone told the story of the tragedy and suggested that a force should be raised to pursue the Indians who had committed the murder.

This idea met with favor, but a few of the older citizens were of the opinion that it would not be possible to effect anything by proceeding in that way, and one old gentleman made quite a speech in regard to the uselessness of undertaking to pursue the murderers.

Hardly had he finished, when the crowd were amazed by the appearance of Maggie Anderson, wild-eyed, haggard and almost frantic from grief and rage.

"Is there a man in this town of Greerville who is coward enough to hold back when the word is passed around to take the war-path to avenge this most brutal murder?" she cried.

"If there is let him step forward that I, a woman, may tell him to his teeth that he is utterly unworthy the name of man! The blood of the murdered Sandy MacAlpine cries aloud for vengeance! And if you men of Greerville fear to undertake to pursue these red butchers, say so outright and we women will take upon ourselves the mission! The blood of the innocent cries aloud to Heaven, and the God of vengeance will surely give the murderers into the hands of the ministers of justice. Blood for blood! Sandy MacAlpine's death must be avenged!"

And then the girl, overcome by excitement, fell into a violent fit of hysterics and was carried away, screaming and writhing so that it took four strong men to hold her.

This settled the conservative citizens, and

there was no more talk about the uselessness of a pursuit.

The violent words of the girl wrought the crowd up to a great pitch of excitement.

"The gal is right!" Bud McCracken, the town marshal declared. "It would be an everlasting disgrace to Greerville if we didn't take this thing right up! Fellow-citizens, we must raise a gang and go in to see if we can't hunt down these murdering red bucks!"

"Yes, yes!" yelled a dozen voices.

"You can count me in!" the marshal continued. "And if thar's ten or fifteen of you who will go with me, I reckon we will make a good try for vengeance, anyhow!"

"I'm with you, for one!" Comanche Charley cried.

"And I—and I!" echoed nine other voices.

It was soon to be seen that it was not a question as to getting men to go, but to determine who should be selected, for almost all the citizens in the town volunteered.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SEARCH.

AFTER the mustering of the volunteers it did not take long for them to get started.

There were twenty men in the party, including Eddie Livingstone and Mr. Bishop, all armed to the teeth and ready for war.

All the best men in the town were there, as one chap, inclined to be poetical, remarked, "the flower of Greerville had gone on the war-path."

That these twenty good fighting-men would be able to whip fifty, or sixty, Indian warriors, no one doubted; but as far as Livingstone and Bishop were able to judge, there were not over eight or ten men in the attacking party.

By common consent the command of the party had been given to the town marshal, Bud McCracken, although quite a number spoke in favor of putting Comanche Charley as a leader, for, as they argued, he was used to "Injuns and their ways," being an old Indian-fighter, and would be able to handle the expedition better than the marshal, who, though a good man when it came to a town row, yet had no Indian experience.

But Comanche Charley, to the surprise of his admirers, declined the honor.

"No, I ain't anxious to lead the gang," Comanche declared. "Let the marshal take command. Bud is a good man—none better in the town, and he will do the thing up in as good style as any man you kin scare up in the county."

"Oh, yes, the marshal is a good man—there is no discount on him," the citizens assented. "But he ain't use to fighting the red devils—he hasn't had your experience with the bucks, and when it comes to a skirmish you would give him a hundred p'ints in the game and beat him."

"Don't you worry 'bout that! You are not going to find any red bucks to fight," Comanche Charley replied with a sardonic smile. "Do you take these red devils for a pack of fools? If you do, you have made a big mistake! They have too much sense to stay in the Wichita mountains, and wait for us to hunt them up. Long before this they are back on their reservation, and every soul in the place, men, women and children, are prepared to swear that nary a buck has stepped outside the lines for a month of Sundays. We will find the dead man all right, but the fellows who killed him will be over the hills and far away!"

"Yes, but can't we track 'em, you know, strike their trail and follow it right into the Reservation?" urged another one of the party, who was listening to the conversation.

"Yes, mebbe it could be done, if the red bucks were greenhorns or tenderfeet, but they ain't neither, and I reckon they will be able to blind the trail so that no man in our outfit will be able to find it."

We have detailed this conversation because the opinion expressed by Comanche Charley was the one held by all the well-posted men concerned in the expedition.

As far as overtaking and punishing the Indians who had committed the murder went, there was not one chance out of ten that such a thing could be done.

Still, in obedience to popular clamor, due more to the lamentations that Maggie Anderson had made in regard to the fate of her lover than aught else, the expedition had set out for the express purpose of discovering and punishing the Indians who had committed the unprovoked assault.

A half a mile from the town the party met the ranchers, Alex Wallace, of the Triangle, and Lige Maxwell, of the Double-cross.

Astonished at the array, the pair inquired in regard to the meaning of so large a force being upon the road, and greatly amazed and horrified were they when they heard the particulars of the tragedy.

"Well, gentlemen, I was going to Greerville to attend to a little business," the Triangle rancher remarked, "but I reckon that business will have to wait until this expedition gets back, for I am going right along with you, gentlemen!"

"So am I!" Lige Maxwell declared. "And I hope we will be able to get hold of these red

devils—the bloodthirsty scoundrels—so as to teach them a lesson which will be apt to make them keep their paws off of white men in the future.”

“The only good Injun is a dead Injun!” Comanche Charley declared, voicing the opinion which nine out of every ten bordermen hold.

The ranchers took their places in the ranks and again the cavalcade proceeded.

Eddie Livingstone and the New Yorker, Bishop, led the advance, the marshal riding by their side, and doleful faces both of them wore as they rode again over the prairie toward the rugged peaks of the Wichita Mountains.

The party entered the rocky regions, and traversed the Southwest Pass until they came to the little valley where the surprise had taken place.

“A few moments now, and we will see the body, unless the red-skins have removed him from the spot where he fell,” Eddie Livingstone remarked.

But, to the surprise of all concerned, when the riders reached the neighborhood of the clump of pines, not the slightest trace could they discover of the body.

The only signs which remained to show that a most foul murder had been perpetrated, was a dried blood-stain upon a smooth, flat rock.

Eddie Livingstone called attention to the stain.

“This is where poor Sandy fell, I think, and that spot is caused by his blood falling on the stone.”

“But what has become of the body?” Wallace asked. “If MacAlpine was dead, as you state, when you left home, the body ought to be here.”

“Most certainly he seemed like a dead man!” Eddie Livingstone replied. “For if he had not been, I would have endeavored to have saved him. But when he told me that he was done for, and sunk back lifeless, I concluded that as nothing more could be done for him, I had better try to save myself.”

“That is correct!” Bishop declared. “I saw Mr. Livingstone stop to help Mr. MacAlpine, although the bullets were flying around him, and I would not have been willing to take the risk he ran for a good many dollars.”

“The body is probably somewhere near at hand,” the Triangle rancher suggested. “And a search will disclose it. The Indians may have moved it.”

Acting on this idea, the most of the party dismounted and, leaving their horses in the care of those who remained in the saddle, made an exhaustive search, but not the slightest trace could be found of the body.

Then some one suggested that Comanche Charley should try his skill as a tracker and see if he could not hit upon the trail of the red-skins.

“Wal, gents, it would have been a good deal better if you had made that suggestion before,” the saloon-keeper remarked.

“What difference does it make, Comanche?” the marshal asked.

“Why, it don’t give a man much show to lift a trail arter a dozen galoots have been scampering all over the ground,” the old Indian-fighter replied.

“That is true, sure as shooting!” Bud McCracken cried. “We were a pack of idiots not to think of that afore! Still I s’pose it is better late than never, though I reckon you don’t stand much show for your white alley now!”

“Wal, things ain’t as good as they would have been if you fellows had not trampled all over the ground; still, mebbe, I can draw a circle ’round and lift the trail,” Comanche Charley remarked. Now, gents, jest keep quiet for a while and give me a show!”

“Gather right round hyer, boys, and give Comanche a clear sweep,” the marshal remarked.

The members of the expedition gathered around Bud McCracken, who stood upon the rock upon which was the stain of blood, and then Comanche Charley proceeded around the party in a circle, gradually widening it as he progressed, the rest watching him with a deal of interest.

The eyes of the old Indian scout were bent upon the ground as he proceeded, but not until he made a second circle which took him beyond the spot where the Greerville men had tramped over the ground did he show signs that he had discovered anything.

Then from the peculiar way he was proceeding the watchers guessed that he had struck the trail.

For a good ten minutes Comanche Charley kept up the search and then he halted by a chain of low, flat-topped rocks, which led off through the valley to the northwest, another passage by means of which entrance could be gained to the valley.

“Wal, as near as I kin make out, the cusses hid in that ar’ little clump of junipers,” Comanche Charley announced, “and although they did a good deal of roving over the grass, yet I reckon thar wasn’t but three or four of ’em. I put the number down low, for I can’t find any other place whar they seemed to have hid, ’cept in them junipers, and the clump ain’t

big enuff to hold more’n three or four men. But thar’s another footprint along with the moccasin tracks that gits me! It is the tread of a white man—a pretty big fellow too, I should judge, from the looks of the track.”

“Possibly that is Sandy MacAlpine’s tread,” Alex Wallace suggested.

“No, I don’t think so, for I can distinguish one of Sandy’s footprints over yonder, and this is made by a different kind of a boot altogether. Sandy wore a low, flat heel, while this man’s boot has a high heel, a good deal on the cowboy style—a riding-boot, you know, and whoever made the tracks came down along that fringe of timber,” and the speaker pointed to an irregular row of stunted trees which grew along the west entrance to the valley.

The men of the expedition noticed that Comanche Charley had gone up to the fringe of timber, making a most careful examination as he went along.

“Yes, sir-ree, it is a mighty queer thing,” the old scout remarked, scratching his head as though greatly puzzled, “and I don’t understand it at all. The man with the high heels, that came down through the timber, was evidently stealing along, and taking particular care not to make any noise, for all through the timber he walked on tip-toes, never touching his heels to the ground, making the queerest kind of a track that I ever puzzled my head over, and after he left the timber I should judge that he came on at a jump.”

“It certainly is very strange,” Alex Wallace remarked. “But how did the Indians come into the valley?”

“Along that rocky ridge from the westward, I reckon, for I can’t find any traces of ’em, anywhere, and if they came over the rocks it would account for it, for the rocks blind the trail.”

“Ah, yes, I see. Can you find any signs showing which way they departed?” Wallace asked.

The Triangle rancher being regarded as an extremely shrewd fellow, all were willing that he should do the questioning, satisfied that he would get at the truth better than any man in the party.

“No; so I reckon all of them must have gone over the rocks.”

And this was all that could be ascertained in regard to the mysterious affair.

The search was kept up until the setting sun warned the Greerville men that it was time for them to return to the town.

Greatly disappointed at their failure, the cavalcade took up the homeward march.

All the town was on the alert to receive them, and vast was the surprise which was manifested at the strange story which the “outfit” had to tell.

That Sandy MacAlpine was dead no one doubted, but what had become of the body?

This was a riddle which defied solution.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ON THE TRAIL.

POSSIBLY the reader has been wondering what has become of the Lone Hand during all this time, for we have neglected him now for several chapters.

He was not among the crowd who assembled to debate what should be done to avenge the cruel death of Sandy MacAlpine, being absent from the town, and as his adventures are of interest, we will follow his footsteps.

After taking up his quarters in Greerville, he had made a careful examination of the saloons of the town, for long experience had taught him that if the Red Wolves of Wichita had spies in the town—something which he doubted not—the chances were great that some of the saloons would be used by them for a house-of-call.

After a close inspection he came to the conclusion that Comanche Charley’s Cowboy’s Home would bear watching.

Then his attention was attracted to Whispering Ben, and he soon came to the opinion that he was an Eastern crook, but what he was doing in this obscure Texan town was a mystery.

The Lone Hand kept his eyes upon this individual and made up his mind to “shadow” him in the most persistent manner.

“To my thinking there is no man in the town who is so likely to be in league with these Wichita Mountain outlaws as this smooth, oily-tongued fellow,” the man-hunter mused. “I will make it my business to see just exactly what he does during the next few days.”

The Lone Hand had not forgotten that he had been in the Jew’s store, examined the letter-rack and had spoken about getting some mail, just about the time that the decoy letter was taken, and he strongly suspected that this Mr. Benjamin Armstrong was the man who had taken it.

So it happened that when Whispering Ben mounted his horse and set forth for a ride one day, a mile or so behind him, came the Lone Hand.

It was a difficult country to shadow a man in, for it was not possible for the tracker to get anywhere near the man upon whose trail he was following without danger of discovery, but the Lone Hand was provided with a powerful field-glass, which was a great aid.

Then too, Whispering Ben was an extremely

bad rider; he had not been accustomed to riding and was far from being at home in the saddle, so he rode very slowly, never allowing his horse to go faster than a slow canter.

Owing to this fact it was much easier to shadow him than if he had been a dashing Texan rider who delighted in a smart gallop.

On went Whispering Ben, and behind him, as constant as his shadow, came the Lone Hand.

A few miles out of Greerville, Whispering Ben halted and engaged in a conversation with two young men, and the man-hunter, taking advantage of a small grove of timber, managed to approach within an eighth of a mile of the spot upon which the three stood.

As the reader has probably suspected, Whispering Ben was the man who introduced himself to Sandy MacAlpine and Eddie Livingstone as the school teacher, Naham Bishop.

“Now what game is he up to?” the Lone Hand muttered.

By the aid of his field-glass, he had been able to identify the two young men, and having made their acquaintance in Greerville, was not inclined to regard them with suspicion.

“If those two young fellows are not all right, then I am woefully deceived!” he murmured. The entrance into the house of all the party puzzled the man-hunter.

“Since I have begun I will see it out!” he exclaimed.

There was another little grove, much nearer the house, and the Lone Hand made his way to it, and there sat down to wait.

And, as the reader knows, a long and weary wait he had of it, too, for Whispering Ben did not take his departure until the next morning, when, in company with the young men, he started for the Wichita Mountains.

The Lone Hand always went provided for such sieges as this, for he carried both food and drink in his saddle-bags.

Into the Wichita Mountains, stanch as the bound on the scent of blood, he trailed the three.

After the party got into the Wichita Mountains, the sleuth-hound found his task an easier one.

The rough, irregular nature of the ground compelled the horsemen to proceed at a slow rate, and when the party halted in the little valley, the Lone Hand, anticipating that they had come to their journey’s end, hid his horse in a convenient thicket, and, seeing that there was good cover to the northwest amid the rocks, made a circle so as to get into that locality.

In order to do this he was obliged to make a considerable detour, and he was fully an eighth of a mile from the rocking stone when the attack on the party took place.

The Lone Hand was well up on the hillside, so he had a good view of the tragedy, although he was not able to see the assailants, as they kept in concealment; their wild whoops, though, betrayed that they were Indians.

The man-hunter was so situated that he could not interfere to take a hand in the fight, for he was on the further side of a deep defile, and by the time that he had crossed it and gained the rocky ridge which led down into the valley, the affair was all over.

Whispering Ben and Eddie Livingstone were fleeing for their lives, pushing their horses to their best speed.

The Lone Hand soon made up his mind.

“I don’t know how many there are of these red rascals,” he muttered, “but from the fact of their striking to cover so closely I should fancy that there is not a large party, and they fear to come out lest that fact should become known; if this is the truth I think I will try to give them a lesson which will last them one while.”

Then, with cautious steps, taking advantage of every boulder, tree-clump and group of bushes to afford him shelter, he advanced toward the rocking stone.

The men in ambush, who had so wantonly assailed the little party, did not attempt to pursue the fleeing men, although they yelled and discharged shot after shot to give the fugitives the impression that they were hot in pursuit.

The Lone Hand understood what they were up to, and stronger grew his impression that the ambushed men were few in number.

“It would be a joke, now, if I could succeed in turning the tables upon them,” he muttered. “They surprised the three white men, and now I think there is a chance for me to surprise them.”

The man-hunter succeeded in getting within a hundred yards of the rocking stone before the men in ambush came into the open.

Perceiving that they were forcing their way through the bushes the Lone Hand sunk behind a convenient clump of junipers and, peering through the leafy screen, watched to see what manner of men it was who had compassed the death of Sandy MacAlpine.

Out from the bushes stepped two men, habited in the buckskin garb of the red-skin, with painted faces and coarse black hair adorned with feathers.

But no red warrior who had ever trod mother earth walked as these men walked, and the hoarse shouts of laughter which came from

their lips showed the Lone Hand immediately that they were white men, masquerading as Indians.

"Only two of them!" the man-hunter muttered, grimly, and his fingers tightened upon his revolvers.

"Well, if the court knows herself, and she thinks she does, I reckon I will be able to take those fellows into camp before they are many minutes older."

"You kin jest bet that we did this job up in good style, and no mistake!" the foremost one of the two cried.

The Lone Hand pricked up his ears, and a grim smile came over his stern features. And it was no wonder, for the voice revealed to him that the speaker was no stranger—in fact, he might be said to be an intimate acquaintance, for it was the cowboy, George Hardacre.

"Yes, it takes two galoots about our size to do a trick of this kind up brown!" the second man responded.

Again the Lone Hand smiled.

As he expected, the second man was as well known to him as the first, being Hardacre's pard, Reddy Gallagher.

"It seems fated that I and these fellows should run counter to each other," the man-hunter muttered.

"I reckon the captain will be satisfied with the way we have attended to this job, although he seemed to think we were kinder losing our grip 'cos we didn't lay out that durned L. Hand," George Hardacre remarked.

"Oh, we will fix him now afore we git through with him, and don't you forget it!" Gallagher declared. "But he is one of the galoots that you don't want to take any chances on, you know. The next time we go for him we must fix it so that thar won't be no slip-up!"

"That is so; we must settle him for good. The captain's got it in for him, and he will never be satisfied until he is laid out."

"We must work a trick for him like this hyer one that has settled Sandy MacAlpine's hash. You see we did the job without any break," Gallagher remarked.

"Yes, I drew a bead on him, and put the ball right through his heart; and I would like to serve all the rest of these durned settlers the same way!" Hardacre exclaimed.

These few words showed the Lone Hand exactly what had taken place. The stranger, Armstrong, had acted as a decoy to lure Sandy MacAlpine to his death, and now that he understood all the circumstances, he regretted bitterly that he was not able to interfere before the attack was made, so as to save the young man.

"At least I can avenge him!" he muttered through his firm-set teeth.

The time for action had come.

Rising as noiseless as a ghost from behind the clump of junipers, he bounded forward with rapid strides toward the astonished ruffians.

A cocked and leveled revolver was in each hand, and loudly his stern command rung on the air:

"Hands up!"

Not a moment did the ruffians hesitate, but up went their hands instant. They were too old birds—had lived too long on the frontier not to understand that the new-comer "meant business," and that if they hesitated to obey the injunction, or made a movement as though they meditated drawing their weapons, which they had replaced in their belts after recharging them, their lives would not be worth a moment's purchase.

"Now I want you to understand that you two fellows are in a tight place!" the Lone Hand exclaimed, sternly. "I am on the war-path, bigger'n a wolf, and if either one of you rile me, you will feel my teeth in a way that you will not like."

"Hardacre, I will begin with you. Take your weapons out of your belt and place them on the ground. Don't attempt any monkey business, for I will bore a hole right through you on the first sign of treachery; and, Gallagher, you keep perfectly quiet—don't move, if you value your life. Remember that many a good man has been shot because he was a little careless when another fellow had the drop on him!"

"All right, captain; I know when I am in a tight place, and you kin bet your life that I won't give you no chance to plug me if I know myself, and I reckon I do!" Gallagher declared.

In an extremely sullen way George Hardacre took the revolvers from their holsters. This was the critical moment.

With his hands on his pistols, oh! how he longed to give battle to the vigilant foe, who had succeeded in obtaining such an advantage, but although the cowboy was no coward, yet he did not dare to attempt to bring on a fight when laboring under such a disadvantage, but if the Lone Hand had betrayed the slightest sign of irresolution, Hardacre most certainly would have attempted to resist.

But the man-hunter was watching his men so closely that neither one dared to disobey his commands.

The cowboy placed his weapons upon the ground.

"Straighten up and fall back five paces!" the Lone Hand commanded.

George Hardacre obeyed.

"Now, Gallagher, place your weapons on the ground."

The man complied without a word, and then executed a retrograde movement similar to the one performed by his companion.

Then the Lone Hand took his seat upon a rock, and, with his left hand, fished out a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and threw them at George Hardacre's feet.

The two scoundrels were amazed at this; they gazed in astonishment at the handcuffs, and then looked inquiringly at the man-hunter.

"Hardacre, have the kindness to snap those bracelets on the wrists of friend Gallagher!" ordered the Lone Hand.

"Wot in thunder do you want to do that for?" the ruffian growled.

"Never mind the why and the wherefore; do it!"

Hardacre obeyed.

The man-hunter produced another pair of handcuffs and threw them down before Gallagher.

"Now, Gallagher, as one good turn deserves another, put them on Hardacre!"

"How kin I with these hyer things on?" the cowboy growled, holding up his wrists.

"Oh, you can do it if you will try," the other replied. "Come, oblige me now!"

There was a menace in the voice, so the ruffian, in a clumsy way, snapped the "bracelets" on the wrists of his fellow villain.

"There, now, I reckon I have got you two men just about where I want you!" the man-hunter remarked, in accents which betrayed decided satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"MANY A SLIP 'TWEEN CUP AND LIP."

THE ruffians glared at the handcuffs for a moment, then looked at each other, and then at the Lone Hand.

"You don't exactly understand this sort of thing, eh?" the man-hunter queried.

"No, blamed if I do!" George Hardacre growled. "It is a kind of game that never was played on me afore," Gallagher added.

"It is a sort of prisoner's base," the Lone Hand remarked, dryly. "The fact is, boys, you are now in the hands of the law, and you need not think you can slip out of the hole this time as you slipped out of the calaboose. Lightning does not strike twice in the same place, you know, and you cannot play that game again. I will take care that you are safely kept until the rangers lug you off to stand trial, and, to my thinking, the chances are good that you will both have to swing for this day's work."

At this point there came a sound which caused all of the three to start with surprise.

It was a groan from Sandy MacAlpine.

"The man is not dead, by all that is wonderful!" the Lone Hand exclaimed.

The ruffians were astounded, as they had felt certain that the young man was dead.

"I reckon you two fellows better march down the valley for about a hundred paces, then sit down and make yourselves comfortable, while I see what can be done for MacAlpine."

The cowboys understood that this was a command, and so, being in the toils, they did as they were bid.

Having then got them at a safe distance, so that there would not be any danger of either of the two surprising him while he examined the prostrate man, the Lone Hand thrust one of his revolvers back in its holster, secured the weapons which he had compelled the cowboys to place upon the ground, and hurried to where MacAlpine lay upon the grass.

He had arranged the situation so that while he bent over MacAlpine he could still keep his eyes upon the cowboys, although disarmed and fettered as they were, there was not much danger of their trying to either escape or to attack the foe who had conquered them so easily.

As the Lone Hand bent over the young man MacAlpine stirred and opened his eyes.

"Hello, hello!" the Lone Hand cried, "you are showing a good deal of animation for a dead man."

Then up rose Sandy MacAlpine to a sitting posture; the man-hunter, remembering the cowboy's boast that he had shot the settler through the heart, opened his shirt—he had noticed that there were not any signs of blood on the flannel to denote that the young man was wounded.

"I thought I was done for," MacAlpine said. "I was sure the ball pierced my chest, but, strange to say, I feel all right now, excepting that I am a little dizzy as though I had received a shock."

The skin on the young man's chest was unbroken but there was a black and blue spot just over the heart, as though he had received a violent blow there.

Further examination disclosed that Sandy MacAlpine had escaped death by an accident which seemed almost miraculous.

In a secret pocket in the under side of his

flannel shirt he carried a large leather pocket book, which was stuffed full of folded papers and money—more papers than cash though by far—and the bullet, which had been designed to take his life, was imbedded in the pocketbook.

"There is many a slip between the cup and the lip," the Lone Hand observed when this discovery was made. "And you can thank your lucky stars that your assailant aimed straight for your heart, for if he had not the chances are big that you would have been in the other world by this time."

"A miss is as good as a mile, you know," Sandy MacAlpine replied, rising to his feet as he spoke with the assistance of the other's hand, for he was still weak from the shock he had suffered. "And I reckon I am worth about a dozen dead men."

Then his eyes fell upon the Indians—as he supposed.

"Hello, you have got the bucks, haven't you, and were there only two of them?" he exclaimed in surprise. "Well, I am astonished! I thought there was a dozen, at least!"

"These are no Indians, but a couple of cowboys in disguise, George Hardacre and Reddy Gallagher," the Lone Hand replied. "Come over and take a look at them."

The two proceeded to the cowboys, and the two men rose to their feet as they approached.

"You are right," Sandy MacAlpine remarked, as he gazed in the faces of the two men. "And I must say that I never was more astonished in my life."

"These two men laid in wait on purpose to kill you," the Lone Hand explained. "And you were lured to this spot expressly to give them a chance to assassinate you. How was it that you and your pard came here with that stranger?"

Then Sandy MacAlpine told the story of the treasure.

"The old rascal," the Lone Hand exclaimed, when the young man finished. "His story was all bosh! That the hollow under the rocking stone has been used as a treasure-house by outlaws I do not doubt, but he knew well enough that there wasn't any treasure there now. It was merely a scheme to get you here so as to give these scoundrels a chance to assassinate you."

"Well, there has been trouble between us," Sandy MacAlpine admitted. "That is, I have been threatened by them. They came to my place the other day, and threatened to lay me out, but my pard, Eddie Livingstone, managed to get the drop on them with a double-barreled shotgun, and drove them off."

"What was the excuse for the attack?" asked the man-hunter, fixing his keen eyes on the faces of the prisoners as he put the question.

"Well, I don't exactly know," the other replied. "I never had any trouble with them before, but they came to my place, apparently, for the express purpose of kicking up a row. Of course, there has always been bad blood, more or less, between the settlers and the cowboys, and I suppose these fellows went for me on general principles."

"Yes, but from the trouble that was taken to arrange this trap, it appears to me that there is something more than mere class spite at the bottom of it," the Lone Hand remarked thoughtfully, watching the faces of the prisoners intently as he spoke.

"Yes, it would seem so," Sandy MacAlpine replied.

"Have you any bitter personal enemy who has reason to desire your death?" the man-hunter asked.

"Not that I know of."

"I say, don't either of you two fellows want to make a clean breast of it and turn State's evidence?" the Lone Hand asked. "The man who does so will be apt to get off with a light punishment."

"I reckon you know all thar is to the thing now!" George Hardacre declared in a defiant manner. "We did try to do MacAlpine up, and no mistake, but as long as we didn't come it, I reckon that it isn't a hanging matter, nohow you kin fix it!"

"But an assault with intent to kill is worth five or ten years in the State Prison, and that is what both of you will be likely to get unless you are wise enough to lessen your punishment by confessing who arranged this plot to decoy MacAlpine here so that he might be killed," the man-hunter remarked, sternly.

"Ah, thar wasn't any plot!" the cowboy declared, stoutly. "My pard and myself got wind that MacAlpine was coming up this way, and we jest got ourselves up in this Injun rig so as to lay him out, and have it charged to the redskins if the other galoots got sight of us."

"That is not true!" the young man exclaimed, promptly. "It was not possible for any one to know anything about this trip, unless they were posted in regard to it by this man Bishop, in advance."

"Yes, I understand that, for I tracked Bishop to your house, and kept watch until you three started on this expedition, then trailed you here," the Lone Hand remarked.

This announcement made the listeners open their eyes in astonishment, and the cowboys, in particular, looked at each other as much as to

ask what kind of a man was this who had been taking so much trouble.

"You see, I had a suspicion that this stranger was up to some crooked business, and so I concluded to shadow him for a while," the man-hunter continued. "The fellow deceived you in regard to his name. He called himself Armstrong in the town, and when I found out that he had made arrangements to stop at Comanche Charley's place I knew that he was not all right, for that saloon, I am satisfied, is the headquarters in Greenville of this gang of outlaws who call themselves the Red Wolves of Wichita."

Despite the command that the cowboys had over their features they could not prevent an anxious expression from appearing on them at this announcement.

"Is that true?" asked Sandy MacAlpine in surprise.

"Yes, I am on the track of the Red Wolves, and before long I expect to gather them all in. Both of these fellows belong to the band!"

"Tain't so!" George Hardacre cried.

"It is a durned lie!" Gallagher exclaimed.

"Oh, no, it is a fact, but neither one of you is the leader of the gang, but I have shadowed him though, and unless he is a great deal smarter than I think he is, I will have the bracelets on his wrists before he is many days older."

"Brag is a good dog," George Hardacre remarked with a sneer, yet it was plainly to be seen that he was troubled by the confident declaration of the sleuth-hound.

"You will find that I am not bragging, and when you see me spring the trap upon your leader you will then wish that you had accepted my offer and turned State's evidence."

"Oh, we reckon we kin stand the press, all right!" the cowboy replied, defiantly, but it was plainly to be seen from the anxious look in his eyes that he did not feel as comfortable about the matter as he pretended.

"Go your own gait, of course, but if I secure other testimony and push the case against you, then you may wish that you had accepted my offer."

The pair shook their heads in dogged refusal.

"Now then, let me see how I will arrange this matter," the Lone Hand remarked, reflectively.

"Your pard, and this scamp, Bishop, will go at once to Greenville and report you as being killed by the red-skins, and the chances are that a party will be formed to come here for the purpose of recovering your body, and seeing if the tracks cannot be struck. And in that party I have an idea the chief of this Red Wolf gang will ride. He will be anxious to see if the scheme worked all right. Now I want to bother him a little, so, Mr. MacAlpine, I will have to ask you to allow the world to believe that you are dead for a little while longer, and we will seek a hiding-place in the mountains until this searching-party gets out of the way."

Sandy MacAlpine replied that he had no objections, and then the Lone Hand conducted the party out of the valley, keeping to the rocky west ridge so that the trail could not be followed.

As the reader will remember this device was effectual in baffling even an experienced old scout like Comanche Charley.

In a dense thicket, some five miles to the southwest of the valley of the rocking stone, the party lay concealed until sundown, and then they proceeded toward Greenville.

Late at night they arrived at Sandy MacAlpine's house and roused the astonished Eddie Livingstone from his sleep.

It was the Lone Hand's purpose to conceal his prisoners and MacAlpine until he made another move in the difficult game which he was playing so skillfully.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A SURPRISE.

AFTER making his arrangement the Lone Hand set off for the town.

When he arrived at Greenville, although it was near midnight, he found that the town was wide awake.

The inhabitants were so busily engaged in discussing the stirring events of the day that they were keeping later hours than usual.

As the Lone Hand pretended to be ignorant of all that had occurred he was immediately pounced upon by a dozen who were anxious to tell him of the wonderful things that had happened.

From the hotel, in company with Bud McCracken, who had been extremely flattered by the close attention that the Lone Hand had paid to his recital of how he had bossed the searching-party, as well as by a careless remark or two that the man-hunter had let fall to the effect that if it had been possible for any one to catch the murdering red-skins he, the marshal, would have been certain to do it, the sleuth-hound proceeded to Comanche Charley's saloon.

When the pair came in, Alex Wallace was leaning upon the bar at the extreme end, conversing in a low and earnest tone with Comanche Charley, but the conversation stopped the moment the two entered, and the Lone Hand, who noticed everything without apparently paying particular attention, fancied that

the two looked uncomfortable when they saw him in company with the marshal.

Comanche Charley hastened forward so as to wait upon the new-comers.

"Same as allers," said McCracken, and the saloon-keeper knew that this meant whisky.

The Lone Hand took a glass of ale.

"Anything new?" Comanche Charley asked, with a look at the man-hunter as though he expected that he had something to tell.

"Nary thing," the marshal replied.

And then, in an extremely innocent way, the Lone Hand proceeded to explain how surprised he was when he returned to the town and learned what had occurred.

He noticed that while he spoke, Alex Wallace was paying strict attention to his words, as was also Mr. Armstrong, who sat in a corner of the room.

Then the marshal proceeded to explain what his ideas were about red-skins in general, and while he was talking the Lone Hand, by means of the glass which adorned the wall behind the bar, noticed Alex Wallace make a signal to Armstrong.

Then the rancher sauntered out of the saloon, and in a few minutes the stranger got up and also left the place.

"Aha! it is as I suspected," the Lone Hand muttered to himself, "there is an understanding between the two. I must see if I can't get the nippers on this stranger."

After the marshal finished his recital, the pair quitted the saloon, and when they were in the street, the Lone Hand astonished Bud McCracken with the story of Sandy MacAlpine's miraculous escape, and how he had captured the two cowboys; then he explained his suspicions in regard to the stranger, Armstrong, and suggested a plan of operations in which he needed the marshal's aid.

This he readily agreed to give, for he felt proud at being called upon to co-operate with one of the great men of the Government Secret Service.

The marshal turned down the street, and the Lone Hand went to the corral at the back of the saloon; he had discovered that the rancher usually kept his horse there while in town.

The horse was gone, so the man-hunter reasoned that Wallace had started for his ranch, and he jumped to the conclusion that the stranger had walked out of the town with him so as to get an opportunity to converse without danger of being overheard, or of attracting attention.

When he arrived at the edge of the town, he discerned Armstrong, in the distance, evidently returning; the rancher was not to be seen.

"He has gone on, and so will not be able to interfere with my little game!" the Lone Hand muttered.

There was a bright moon, but the man-hunter had skulked along in the shadow of the houses, so as to avoid being seen, and when he made the discovery that Armstrong was returning, he concealed himself behind a low shanty and waited until the other was close at hand; then he abruptly stepped out and intercepted him, his right hand on the butt of the revolver peeping from its holster.

"Stop a moment, you are wanted!" said the Lone Hand to Whispering Ben.

The New Yorker halted as though he had been suddenly turned into stone, and alarm was written on every lineament of his fat face.

As well as any man on earth, Whispering Ben understood the significance of the phrase "you are wanted!"

It was the man-hunter's salutation to his game when the prey was cornered.

The Lone Hand had his revolver ready, and any motion on the part of the other looking toward resistance would have quickly brought the tool out.

But Whispering Ben had no idea of showing fight. He was armed of course; few men in Greer county who are not, but he was not one of the kind to pull a revolver on the slightest provocation. Besides, his weapon was in the pistol-pocket of his pantaloons, and long before he could have got it out the other would have laid him low.

He knew this, but even if he had confronted the other on even terms, he was too chicken-hearted to make a fight with any such man as the Lone Hand.

"Excuse me, my friend, haven't you made some mistake?" Whispering Ben exclaimed; his voice trembling in spite of his efforts to appear calm.

"Oh, no, you are wanted in the very worst kind of way, and I reckon that you are old crook enough to know what that means!"

"Upon my word, sir, you have the advantage of me. I do not understand what you are driving at!"

"Oh, yes, you do! I am one of the officers of the Government Secret Service, and I want you for the murder of Sandy MacAlpine!"

Whispering Ben turned ghastly pale, and for a moment he could not speak, then he managed to stammer:

"Why do you charge me with the crime—what have I to do with it? It was the Indians who killed Mr. MacAlpine, and they would, undoubtedly, have killed Mr. Livingstone and

myself had we not fortunately gained our horses and so escaped."

"Oh, no, I know better. The two make-believe Indians, George Hardacre and Reddy Gallagher have been captured by me, and so I know all the particulars of the plot. You are in a tight place, Mr. Armstrong, *alias* Bishop, *alias* a dozen other names, I presume, and if you are wise you will turn State's evidence."

By this time Whispering Ben had recovered from the surprise and, with the cunning which came from long experience, guessed that the man-hunter had not so good a case as he pretended, or else he would not urge him to confess.

"You have been deceived, my dear sir; I had no hand in this matter, and so have nothing to confess," he replied, assuming a lofty tone.

"All right, if you choose to stand the racket it is your lookout and not mine."

Then the Lone Hand snapped a pair of handcuffs upon the wrists of Whispering Ben and conveyed him to the calaboose, where the marshal was in waiting to receive him.

But McCracken had enlisted three trusty men to aid him, besides Black Jack, the Jailer, so there was no danger of any prisoners being taken out of the jail this time.

Then the two cowboys were brought to town and placed in the jail.

When Greenville awoke in the morning and discovered what had happened the town fairly went wild.

Then when Sandy MacAlpine appeared, and in company with Eddie Livingstone, told how he had been treated and talked of Lynch law, the cry was soon taken up.

For some unaccountable reason the marshal and his men were absent, and the Lone Hand did not attempt to interfere with the mob when they broke open the door of the calaboose and dragged the prisoners out.

Ropes were speedily put around their necks and the ends passed over the branches of some stunted trees in the center of the town.

Then the Lone Hand took a part in the proceedings.

"Hold on a moment, fellow-citizens!" he exclaimed. "Give these men a chance to confess! All of them, I think, are members of the outlaw gang, the Red Wolves of Wichita! If any man will reveal the secrets of the gang—tell who is their leader, and what man, or men, in the town are aiding them, he ought to go free!"

"Yes, yes," yelled the crowd, "confess, confess!" and the men at the ropes gave them impatient tugs.

This terrible ordeal was too much for Whispering Ben, and he broke down.

"Don't hang me, and I will tell all I know!" he cried. "Alex Wallace, whose right name is Godfrey Lovelance, the Triangle rancher, is the chief of the Red Wolves, and Comanche Charley is their agent here!"

Alex Wallace and Comanche Charley rode into the town just as the disclosure was made.

The roar that the people gave at the sight of them, and the spectacle which greeted their eyes of the three men with ropes around their necks told the story plainly enough.

All was discovered! They drew their weapons and endeavored to seek safety in flight, but as every man in the crowd was armed, and the majority of them with rifles, the movement brought after them a storm of bullets.

Down went horses and riders, writhing in the agonies of death, and at the same instant the defiant ruffians, Hardacre and Gallagher, whose hands were red with the blood of a dozen innocent men, were hanged.

The miserable informer was placed on the back of his horse and told to "git!" a command which he obeyed with wonderful alacrity.

A few more words and our tale is told.

The Triangle Ranch and Comanche Charley's saloon were searched and ample proof of the guilt of their owners found.

Very little money was discovered, though; evidently the robbers had carefully secreted it.

The man-hunter had found Lovelance, who was wanted in Lower Texas for murder, but his death settled the account.

Soon after the "lynch party," Sandy MacAlpine and Maggie Anderson were married, and no guest was there at the wedding whose presence they prized more than that of the Lone Hand, who had shadowed the evil-doers to their doom.

THE END.

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